

THE BIG FRONTIER WESTERN MAGAZINE

NOV.



44 Western

MAGAZINE

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RANCHO OF FEAR

by WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER

GUN CALL

by H. A. DEROSSO

SEP 19 PM



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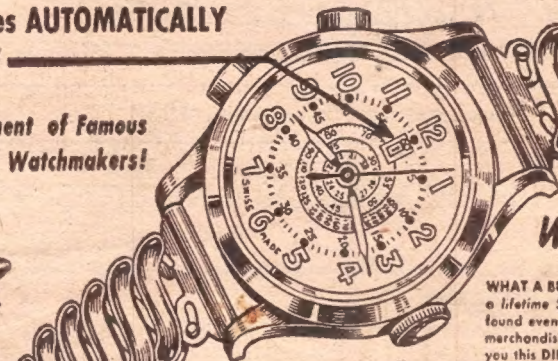
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.44 Western

MAGAZINE

Combined with **ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES**

Vol. 29

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.44 TALK

IT'S easy enough to think of the old-time cowhand as a carefree, hell-roaring character who hit town Saturday night, and proceeded to rip it apart with his fighting, drinking and general carousing. But we are apt to forget that in order to make the West the growing and successful place that it was it took business men, too.

The man who needed the most business sense, next to the ranch owner, of course, was the trail boss. It was his responsibility to get the owner's cattle up the long trail north from Texas. It was up to him, too, to take care of the men, and more than any other man in the outfit, the trail boss had to be always quick to handle any emergency.

The story of a particularly resourceful trail boss was told to us recently by Allan K. Echols. . . .

In the old days a man's word was usually his bond, and he didn't have to go around with a driver's license and a passport picture in order to cash a little check here and there when he needed the money.

That did not mean that banker's were fools, however. They usually would believe a fellow if they knew him or if some friend knew him. But once in a while a stranger might have to identify himself before he could get a banker to hand out a large piece of money in exchange for a little piece of paper from a stranger.

One example of this was illustrated by an old trail driver who was up in Wyoming delivering a herd of cattle for the famous King Ranch of Texas, whose running W brand was known all over the cattle country.

One night this driver was about at the end of the trail, and had just about run out of expense money when he hit the little town of Sydney, Wyoming. He gave the boys some spending money and turned them loose on the town for the night, but the next morning five of them did not show up for duty, not having finished painting the town the exact shade of red they wanted it to be. The trail boss fired them on the spot, but he owed them each \$120.00, and found that he did not have enough cash on hand to pay them off.

So the trail boss went to see the banker and asked him to cash a \$600.00 check he wanted to draw on the King Ranch. The banker knew the ranch, but did not know the trail boss, so he asked him for identification.

The trail boss said that he did not know a soul in town, was here for the first time, and as far as he knew, the last time, but he needed the money. The banker wanted to let him have it, but felt that he at least should get somebody to identify him. So the trail boss went out onto the street and had a look around, but as he suspected,

(Continued on page 110)

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Bury Me Deep...

By John T. Lynch



Fancy coffins were used in Montana in the 80's for those men—and there weren't many—who weren't shot, knifed or hanged.

SO SELDOM did a man die a quiet, natural death, in bed, in Saltese, Montana, in the 80's, that it was considered an honor to do so. Non-violent demises were so few and far between that the oddity became a matter of municipal mourning—and celebrating.

It was the custom of the local undertaker, Wills Allen, to keep on hand a few assorted, fancy coffins, such as used in the East. These caskets, imported from San Francisco, were reserved for the citizens who would depart from the world without bearing a gunshot hole, a knife puncture, or the marks of a hangrope around the neck.

The average corpse was simply placed in a crude, pineboard box and hastily dumped into his last resting place by only the undertaker—who was also town coroner—and his assistant.

One winter's night, during sub-zero weather, Big Cab Quinebaugh took on an enormous load of alcohol. His intention was merely to fortify himself against catching a cold, but he somehow over-fortified his huge six-foot system. His friends, also in the act of getting fortified, did not notice when Big Cab weaved out the saloon

door and staggered up the snowy trail into the dark night.

The next morning they found Big Cab's body. It was lying straight and frozen stiff, covered by more than an inch of snow.

The town quickly decided that, although Cab did not die in bed, he had breathed his last in a natural and peaceable manner.

The coroner, always happy to make the extra profit entailed by burying an individual in a real casket, at the expense of the late lamented's friends, officially agreed that Big Cab should be given an "Eastern sinkin'."

Big Cab had picked an embarrassing time to die; the undertaker suddenly realized that he had only one fancy coffin in his establishment. His new shipment had not yet arrived, and the one available casket was constructed to hold a corpse of small stature. A town meeting was called to weigh the puzzling matter.

Besides being local undertaker-coroner, Wills Allen was also the area's only judge. As such, he presided at all gatherings of import to the community. Calling the

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

meeting to a semblance of order, Wills Allen explained the dilemma. "The only casket I got was made for a smaller man than Big Cab," he said. "And I won't get my new batch of coffins for about a month. My suggestion is that we keep Big Cab on ice—bein' he's already froze stiff—until we get a casket to fit him right smart."

The crowd debated. They decided that Cab wouldn't like to lie around that long in such a frigid state. "Ain't there no way to make that casket big enough?" somebody inquired.

"No," was the answer. "I could knock out th' bottom, and let Big Cab's feet stick out—but that wouldn't be seemly nor fittin'." Then Coroner Wills Allen made another suggestion. "Only thing I could do," he said, "would be to cram Big Cab up until he fit. Cram him in, sort of. But that wouldn't be very fittin' either."

"Looks like what's fittin' can't be done," came a voice from the crowd. "Because th' coffin ain't fittin'." The crowd roared with laughter.

"We gotta' do our best," said another townsman. "I vote you cram Big Cab in that coffin the best you can."

A vote was taken. The "ayes" had it.

It took Willis Allen and his helper a good six hours to bend, twist, force and cram Big Cab's body into the pretty box. It was necessary to fold the big corpse up like a big hairpin. As the body was still frozen stiff, and rigor mortis had long set in, the two undertakers had to use a crowbar and a sledge hammer to do the job. With a sigh of relief, they nailed on the lid with great spikes. Big Cab was ready for his honorable burial.

The entire populace was at the graveside. Speeches, tears, and whiskey flowed profusely. The orators delicately refrained from making any references to Big Cab's former character. Cab had never had any. The grave was closed. In a few days the folks of Saltese had forgotten their beloved

friend. But Wills Allen could not get Big Cab out of his mind. He was bothered night and day. He regretted, more and more each day, the thing he had not told anyone about. Only his helper knew the terrible truth: In order to get Big Cab into the coffin, they had to place him face down.

In the Powder River country, where Saltese was situated, there had long been a saying to the effect that a man should be buried, facing the way he headed after death. Poor Cab was facing downward. . . .

The matter weighed on Wills Allen's conscience until he could bear it no more. He called a town meeting to confess his terrible secret.

"Folks," the corner told the gathering, "I had to bury Big Cab face down!" He waited for the shocked surprise and scathing denunciations to follow his announcement. But the crowd was strangely silent. Big Cab was a thing of the past, and Saltese was a busy place.

Wills repeated his confession. Finally, a voice spoke up. "What if you did bury Cab face down. He's buried, ain't he?"

The coroner reminded the crowd that a man should be buried facing the direction in which he would spend the hereafter.

This time the folks whispered and talked quietly with each other. Wills Allen, up on the speaker's platform, wiped his brow while he awaited the awful recriminations that would sure come, now. Maybe they'd even lynch him!

But the crowd had no such intention. Their elected spokesman said, "Wills, there ain't no call for you to take on so. We all figger you did th' right thing. Now, you knew Big Cab as well as any of us did. If Big Cab is buried facin' down—well, that's sure th' right direction for Cab to be facin'!"

Wills Allen was happy once again. But, from that time on, he always had a large assortment of the fancy coffins on hand—especially the large size. ■ ■ ■

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Rancho of



Ayres whirled, moving
fast for a man of his
size . . .

You never know what an hombre's really like until the last white chip is down. It takes something like the stockade called the Rancho of Fear, which even the Indians avoided, to separate the fools, the liars, and the cowards from the real-quill fighting men.

Fear

By Wayne D. Overholser



Thrilling Western Saga

HANK HARKNESS said. "We're caught between layers of time. Too late for the good land, and too early for the irrigation developments which are bound to come."

"Too late for the good land, you say," Orry York shouted. He jabbed a forefinger at the rim fifty feet south of the wagon circle. "You blind fool! Take a look into Sun-

set Valley and then try to tell me we're too late for the good land."

Dave Donovan, squatting by the fire, thought, *Here it is again.* This was the quarrel that had divided the wagon train from the day it had left the Grand River to turn up the Gunnison, then swung south through Unaweep Canyon, and finally forded the Dolores and made the long climb

to this point on Dragon Mesa. Only the domineering tactics of the train captain, Bill Starr, had held the outfit together, but this morning Starr had gone into the valley, and it was Dave's guess he wouldn't be back.

A dozen men were at Harkness's fire. They were evenly divided between those, like Harkness, who had wanted to settle on the Grand and had been bullied into going on by Starr, and the ones who had believed Orry York's glowing word picture of Sunset Valley. It would be decided within the next few hours, Dave thought. If Starr did not return, Harkness's group would go back to the Grand, but there was no way to guess what York's followers would do.

Dave rolled a cigarette, and picking up a burning pine twig from the fire, lighted it. He watched Harkness, wondering how much fight was in him. He was middle-aged, tall and lantern-jawed, an average man who aspired to leadership. York was entirely different. He was about Dave's age, probably under thirty, a bear of a man whose greatest assets were a glib tongue and a brutal toughness that forced a wary respect from everyone in the train except his handsome wife Lela whose only feeling about him was fear.

For a moment Harkness and York glared at each other. There was a shifting of men around the fire so that Harkness's group lined up behind him, sullen because they had come here against their will but had lacked the courage to defy Bill Starr. The others gathered around York, the loud talking ones who shouted that they'd take Sunset Valley from the devil himself if he was down there.

Harkness lowered his gaze and the tension was gone. "All right, Orry, it looks good from up here, but if Bill don't get back. . ."

"He'll get here," York said irritably.

Dave rose and tossed his cigarette into the fire. "Want to bet on that, Orry?"

York swung to face him, his small, dark eyes filled with hatred. The feeling was

mutual. For days now Dave had known he would have to kill York or be killed. He was in love with York's wife Lela. That was where the boot pinched. If he killed York, the rest would say he had his reason for making Lela a widow.

"If he don't, we'll go after him," York said. "Those of us who have a teaspoonful of guts, that is."

"It'll take more'n a teaspoonful," Dave said.

"You're a damned lone wolf," York shouted to him. "Where do you stand on this?"

"Haven't decided," Dave said, and walked to the rim.

A COUNTRY like this made the short hair on a man's neck stand straight out. Up here on top of Dragon Mesa you could see for miles across a broken red-rock land of mesas and deep canyons with the high peaks of the La Sals visible to the southwest and the San Juan range far to the east, almost lost in the haze of distance.

The Lord had taken pains when he'd made this country, Dave thought. He'd dumped the red rock, a hell of a lot of it, and then He'd taken a knife and sliced out the canyons, and He'd piled the trimmings on top of the mesas. He must have laughed up His sleeve, knowing that sooner or later a bunch of white men would be along to grab what they could. Uncle Sam should have left the Utes here. Or set this piece of country aside for mountain goats and eagles.

The slickrock rim dropped off a sheer hundred feet below Dave. From that point the north wall slanted down another thousand feet to the valley floor. The evening before Starr had found a break in the rim about a quarter of a mile to the east. He had returned to camp, reporting that wagons could be taken through the break. Early this morning he had left camp to see if there would be any trouble settling here, a damn fool thing for a man to do by himself, but Starr was that way.

Trouble! All you had to do was to look down into the valley and know you'd get a bellyful of it for the asking. Right out there in the middle was the damndest thing Dave had ever seen, a stockade of pine logs almost as high as the top of a covered wagon. Plenty stout, that stockade. You'd need a cannon to break it down. Inside were ranch buildings: a sprawling log house, a barn with some corrals beside it, a bunk house, and several sheds.

Not even York pretended to know who lived in the valley. Starr had not been able to find anyone in Grand Junction who had even heard of the place until he had finally dug up an old squaw man who had lived with the Utes before they had been herded into Utah.

"Yeah, I've seen the valley from the rim," the old man had said. "The Injuns stayed away on account of most of 'em that went down into the valley got rubbed out. The ones who came back swore it was lightning thunder that killed their pals. Rancho of Fear, they called it."

But still Starr had insisted on coming because only a fool would be stopped by Indian superstition. York, who had seen the valley from the rim, claimed it was a Garden of Eden. Maybe it was if you could wipe out the stockade, but that would take a bit of doing.

The valley was a patch of green in what amounted to a red rock desert. Grass a-plenty for the dozen families of the wagon train, and a creek that headed somewhere in the west end of the valley and meandered across it to find escape through the east wall. Cottonwoods crowded the bank, and up near the head of the stream Dave saw a fair-sized stand of pine.

The valley was all York had claimed. Everybody in the train liked it when they'd pulled in late yesterday afternoon, even Harkness who had been the doubting Thomas all along. Isolated, sure, but that didn't make any difference. Grass and water for irrigation. The weather wouldn't

be too severe in a lower altitude. Grain would grow. Vegetables. Probably fruit. All of it there to be taken. But that was the trouble.

"Ain't worth getting killed for," Harkness had said bluntly. "Sure, everything's here that we want, but I've got a wife and kids. What good's a ranch if I get a dose of lead colic?"

So Starr had said he'd go see. Well, that was one thing about Bill Starr. Bull-headed and domineering, but he was all man, and Dave respected him for that. The question in Dave's mind was how he had managed to live as long as he had. A man needed a little horse sense to go along with his courage, and to tie into a deal like this when you didn't know what you were heading into was damned foolishment and no mistake.

"Can you smell the trouble coming, Dave?"

Startled, Dave wheeled. Lela York stood there, looking gravely at him, a tall woman who had caught Dave's eye in Green River when the wagon train was being organized. She did not wear a wedding ring, so at the time he had not known she was married.

Lela had a dark bruise under her right eye where York had struck her two days before. Nothing new about that, she had told Dave. She'd got used to it, living with York, but that presented a question. How far could a man go interfering between a husband and his wife, even when you loved the wife? Dave still didn't have the answer.

"Yeah, I smell it," Dave said. "And a damned stink it is."

"Starr won't come back," she said.

"How do you know?"

"You know," she answered. "Don't you?"

"Just a hunch with me. Maybe it's something more with you."

"Maybe," she said, and was silent.

A few hours before all of them had

watched Starr cross the valley to the stockade, horse and rider toy-size from this distance. The heavy stockade gate had opened and Starr had gone through. That was the last they had seen of him.

HE LOOKED at Lela, wanting to tell her he loved her but restrained by the fact that she was another man's wife. He thought of the first time he had seen her. It had amounted to a physical shock. A lot of woman, this Lela. Bright blue eyes and rich yellow hair, her nose straight and a little sharp with just a hint of a pug tip. Red lips that naturally wanted to smile and yet found it hard. Later Dave had found out why. Any woman married to Orry York would find it hard to smile. "You shouldn't be here," Dave said. "Orry's on the prod."

"Orry's always on the prod." She stared at the stockade, frowning. "Have I got to go on living with him, Dave? Does a woman have to keep paying for a mistake all her life?"

He had no answer. There was no answer. Harkness had talked about layers of time. Well, Dave was caught between those layers. They squeezed his heart and his soul. He had met Lela too late. -

Dave was a lone wolf as York had said. He had never been one to listen to the voice of his conscience, but he had listened through these weeks while the wagon train had crawled across the eastern Utah desert and into Colorado and on to Dragon Mesa. Wanting another man's wife was enough to make him listen.

York didn't deserve her. Dave had told himself that over and over. If he hadn't been in love with Lela, he'd have beaten hell out of York for laying a hand on her, but he knew that anything he did would make it harder for her.

The others had known how York treated Lela, Starr and Harkness and the rest. They hadn't done anything, but they weren't held back by the reason Dave was.

Most of them were afraid of York. Not Starr, though. Maybe it was just this business of not wanting to interfere. Some men figured that when a woman got married, she contracted to take whatever her husband gave her. It was part of the bargain. Maybe Starr looked at it that way.

"Aren't you going to answer me, Dave?" she asked. "Do I have to go on living with Orry, paying for my mistake?" she repeated.

"No, I'm not going to answer. I can't make you a widow so I can marry you."

"You're afraid of what they'd say. But we can go away, Dave. Go away to some place where people won't know."

"I'd know," he said. "And you'd know."

She clenched her hands, her chest rising and falling with her breathing. She whispered, "There's more to this than you and me, Dave. I've been putting it off, but I've got to tell you. If we go down there, everybody will get killed but me and Orry, and maybe some of the younger women."

He stared at her, sensing the turmoil that was in her. She was torn between the loyalty she should feel for her husband and rebellion over the crime he was trying to commit, whatever it was. Dave had suspected York from the first, but he'd been fair enough to realize he was prejudiced. At least, the others would say that, and he had no proof that York was leading them into a trap. He had tried to warn Starr the night before, and Starr, filled with confidence in his judgment of men, had refused to listen.

"If you know what he's up to," Dave said, "you'd better tell me."

"Donovan."

Dave turned. York stood twenty feet from him, his broad face dark with the fury that gripped him. A fight had been coming. Now it was here. Dave wished he had his gun. Then it would be finished, one way or the other, and he could not be blamed if York forced the issue. But Starr had insisted that guns be left in the

wagons. It was the first law he had laid down after he had been elected captain.

"Get back to the wagons, Lela." Dave moved toward York. "What's biting you, Orry?"

York began to swell like a pigeon. For a moment he could not say anything, so great was his fury. Harkness and the others were drifting toward him, Harkness calling, "What's the matter, Orry?"

Dave swung around York and moved toward Harkness. "I'm getting my gun, Hank."

"No," Harkness said. "You know the rule. You'll be drummed out of camp and we need you."

They needed him more than they knew, Dave thought, but he didn't want to fight with his hands. York was too big, too much of an animal. Dave wouldn't be any good to himself or Lela or anyone else if he lost his eyes. It could happen, for that was the way a man like York fought.

"You know what's the matter, Harkness," York shouted. "You saw him talking to Lela."

"No law against talking to Lela, is there?" Harkness asked. "Cool off, Orry."

"Cool off, you say!" The words boiled out of York so fast they ran together. "You want me to cool off when that stinkin' wife-stealer talks to Lela. He's been trying to get her interested in him ever since we left Green River."

Dave wheeled to face York. There was no putting it off now. The men swung out to form a ring around them.

Dave said, "You're a liar, Orry, a filthy-tongued liar. You ought to have some confidence in your wife if you don't in me."

"That tramp?" York shouted, and rushed at Dave, his great fists swinging.

Now Dave was glad this moment had come. He had to win, and when he won, he'd find out what Lela had been talking about. He came in under York's clubbing blow; he hammered York on the nose with

a driving right. He felt it smash under his fist, and blood spurted and made a scarlet streak down York's mouth and chin.

York let out a great bellow; he smashed Dave's guard down and hit him in the chest. Dave gave ground, knowing that York wanted to get him down into the dirt, but he knew, too, that he couldn't win by backing up. He pivoted as York rushed again; he clipped the man on the chin, and York, caught off balance, went down. He fell on a clump of cactus and rolled off, cursing in pain, and Dave jumped on him, knees driving into York's belly.

They went over and over in a wild tangle of arms and legs, stirring the dust in a red cloud around them. When they came to a stop Dave was on top. He got his hands on the big man's throat and squeezed. York hit him in the ribs, on one side and then the other, each blow sending a spasm of pain through him. He couldn't withstand York's blows. He let go, rolled away and regained his feet.

YORK got up slowly, for he had been hurt. Dave moved in fast, smashing his mouth with a slogging right. York got his arms around Dave and squeezed. Breath went out of Dave's lungs; a red haze rushed across his vision, giving a distorted sense of unreality to everything. He heard Lela scream, "Break out of it, Dave. He'll kill you."

Dave kicked York on a shin above the boot top; he got hold of the man's hair and yanked until his chin was exposed. He cracked York squarely on the point of the chin, snapping his head back. York's grip loosened and Dave jumped clear. York, with nothing to support him, fell forward. For an instant he lay there, and Dave, sucking air into his tortured lungs, thought the man was done. But he was wrong. York's right hand closed over a rock; he scrambled up and threw it

Dave ducked the rock, and straightening, moved forward as York came at him. They crashed into each other like two bulls hammering heads, but before York could get his arms around him again, Dave brought a knee up into the man's stomach.

York bent forward, paralyzed with agony, his face unguarded. Dave swung with his right, knowing this had to be good because he was almost finished. He got his weight behind this blow; he felt the impact go up his arm, into his shoulder. York, knocked cold, went down into the dust and was still.

"A good job," Harkness said coldly. "A damned good job. He wanted to kill you, Dave."

"Get a bucket of water," Lin Knoll said.

Harkness swung on him. "We haven't got water to waste. He'll come around."

Dave put a hand to his face, not sure that his rubbery legs would hold him. He shook his head and lurched to one of the wagons. He gripped a wheel, the world whirling and pitching in front of him, then he sat down and leaned against the wheel. He shook his head, and slowly the blind rage died in him.

"I wanted to kill him, too," Dave said. "I should have done it in Grand Junction."

"Maybe he was right about his wife," Knoll cried.

He was a banty of a man who talked loud and had supported York from the first, perhaps hoping that some of York's toughness would rub off on him. Dave said, "I'm gonna get my gun, Knoll. To hell with the rule."

Knoll backed away. "All right, Dave, all right. You can't deny you like the woman, can you?"

Harkness struck him in the face. "We've had enough trouble, you damned fool. Shut your mug."

Dave's eyes found Lela standing in the circle of men. She had been watching him closely, and now she made up her mind.

She crossed to him and stood beside him, a hand on his shoulder.

"What Orry said was a lie, Knoll." She pinned her eyes on him, and Knoll lowered his gaze, unable to meet hers. "But the answer to your question is yes. I'm proud that Dave likes me. Outside of Bill Starr, he's the only man in the outfit. I'm done with Orry, Knoll. You understand that?"

"Yes, ma'am," Knoll said, studying the dirt.

"I'm ashamed of myself because I should have told Starr or Dave what Orry was up to, but I was afraid." She took a long breath, fingers tightening on Dave's shoulder. "I guess any of you would have been afraid if you'd been treated the way I've been since I married Orry. Most of you have been afraid of him anyhow."

Harkness moved toward her, his lantern-jawed face showing his concern. "What did you mean about what Orry was up to?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she said, "but you'll find a letter pinned inside Orry's shirt that will be proof enough, even to a stupid man like Knoll."

Harkness swung toward York who was coming to. He walked to the man and reaching down, grabbed him by the front of the shirt and ripped it open, buttons flying. York swung a weak blow at him, mumbling through bruised lips, "Lemme alone."

"Nothing here," Harkness said.

"She's lying," Knoll shouted, "just covering up . . ."

"All right, Knoll." Dave gripped a spoke of the wheel and pulled himself upright. "You ain't big enough to make that kind of talk."

"Well, where is it?" Knoll shouted defiantly.

"Try his undershirt," Lela said. "I know he kept the letter. He'll need it if we go into the valley."

York sat up. When Harkness stooped again, York hit him in the face. "Lemme

alone. I got licked. Now lemme alone."

"Get it," Lela screamed. "Get it now or you'll never get it, and you'll be killed just like Starr's been." She began to cry then, turning away from them. "I let him go this morning because I was afraid to stop him."

Dave caught her by the hand and drew her back to him. He put an arm around her and held her, saying, "Don't blame yourself. Nobody could have stopped Starr. I tried."

Harkness, angry now, struck York and knocked him flat on his back. He tore York's undershirt apart. "Here it is." He grabbed it as York raised a hand to stop him, cursing thickly, and stepped away from the man.

"That's mine," York mumbled. "It's mine, I tell you."

Harkness jerked the folded sheet of paper out of the envelope. He unfolded it, read it, and looked up, his face pale. He said, "Get a rope. We've got a hanging to do."

CHAPTER TWO

Lone Wolf

FOR a moment there was stunned silence. York, hurt and scared, began to beg. "You can't do that, Harkness. Damn you, you ain't no judge and jury."

The women and children of the train had been watching from behind the wagons. Now Mrs. Harkness, her thin, aquiline face troubled, stepped over a tongue and walked toward her husband. She said, "He's right, Hank. What's got into you?"

Harkness waved the letter, choked by his anger so that it was hard for him to talk. "He sold us out. Lured us in here into a trap. Why shouldn't we hang him?"

"Read the letter," someone yelled.

York got to his feet, dizzy and reeling, and started for Harkness, cursing him.

Harkness, brave now that York was in no condition to fight, knocked him down. He shouted, "You behave, or I'll hit you over the head with a single tree."

"Read the letter," Dave said.

Harkness swung around. "I'll read it," he said brusquely, "and then by damn we'll hang him. Says here: 'Dear York. I have only another year or so in the valley with the country being settled like it is, but I can still turn a profit as long as the boys can hear the leaves rustle. When the Utes were in the country, I was safe because there weren't any whites coming through except riders who were looking for a hide-out. They have paid well, but I can't eat gold. I need supplies and I'll pay high for them. Bring your settlers if they have loaded wagons. We'll dispose of them as soon as they're inside the stockade, all except the young women. I could use several of them. I suggest you camp on the north rim and contact me at once. Keep this letter. It will identify you. Jake Ayres'."

Harkness threw the letter away, angry eyes sweeping the men. "Plain enough, ain't it? They figure on massacring us as soon as we get inside the stockade. Now is there any one who thinks York don't deserve hanging?"

"It ain't a proposition of what he deserves." Dave walked to Harkness and picked up the letter. "There's a couple of things you ain't thought of. We don't have no authority to hang him, and he might be useful if we want the valley."

"We don't want it," Harkness shouted. "We're going back to the Grand."

"Starr's down there," Dave said.

"You can't help a dead man," Harkness shouted.

"We don't know he's dead."

Harkness swallowed. "All right, maybe he ain't, but that's no reason why we should throw away a dozen lives to save one man."

"I don't see it that way, Hank." Dave turned to the women who had formed a

tight knot behind Mrs. Harkness. "Get dinner. I'll eat with you, Lela." There was no use now to think about proprieties. Lela could not go back to York, so that left it up to Dave to look out for her. He swung to York who still lay on the ground. "Maybe we can make a deal, Orry."

York stared up at him, scared but still defiant. "To hell with you."

The other men had crowded up. One of them said uneasily, "Don't seem we can do much for Bill, Dave. They'd cut us to ribbons before we ever got into the stockade."

"I figure we've got to try," Dave said. "It's risky, sure, but there's one thing about Bill Starr. If it was you down there, he'd get you out or get plugged trying."

They nodded, knowing it was true. They had hated Bill Starr at times, and they had all resented the high-handed way he had run the train. But he was honest, his judgment had usually been sound, and none of them could doubt the courage that was in him. To be a friend to Bill Starr was to have a friend. They looked at Dave, and lowered their eyes, knowing they could not dodge their responsibility without living the rest of their lives under the shadow of cowardice.

Harkness took a long breath, and reached again for the mantle of leadership. "You put it to us tough, Dave. We'll have to try."

"That's better," Dave said, "but I'm wondering if you boys really want this valley?"

"You're damned right we do," a man said. "It's like Hank was saying. Not much good land left. Here it is for the taking."

"And it's held by an outlaw who has no legal claim to it," Dave said. "Every sheriff on the western slope will be in debt to us if we clean this rat's nest out."

"Is land worth dying for?" Harkness demanded, his caution ruling him again.

"That's for you to decide," Dave an-

swered, "but I know this. No man ever earned anything that was worth a damn if he wasn't willing to fight for it."

"Who are you, Dave?" Harkness asked. "You've been a lone wolf ever since we left Green River like York said. I can't make you out."

"It ain't what I have been," Dave said. "It's what I'm going to be. This valley looks good to me. Let's just say I'm tired of what I have been and I want a ranch. I want it so damned bad I'll risk my hide to get it."

"But you don't have a family," Harkness said.

"I've got Lela," Dave broke in. "Maybe it ain't just right, but who'll look out for her if I don't?"

"Yeah, I reckon that's right," Harkness rubbed his chin, fighting his natural fear. Finally he said, "Tell us what to do."

DAVE was the leader, then. Harkness, knowing this was beyond him, had by one sentence elevated Dave to the position he had sought. Dave hesitated, studying these men. Bitter experience had taught him that there were not many like Bill Starr that you knew you could count on when the last chip was down.

Dave turned to York. "Orry, I want you to answer a few questions. If you lie, they'll hang you because I won't be around to save your neck. Savvy?"

York understood all right. These men might not have the courage it took to storm the stockade, but they had York and he was helpless. They'd quickly take their vengeance on him and return to the Grand.

"Ask 'em," York said.

"Does Ayres know you?"

York shook his head. "I never saw him and he never saw me. I got onto this deal through a brother of his who used to be a pardner. He got scared and pulled out."

"You tried to get Starr to stay here and send you, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but hell, he wouldn't listen. Too damned bullheaded."

"Maybe he smelled a skunk."

"No. He just had to do this himself."

Dave nodded at Harkness. "Tie York up and be sure he don't get away. I'll take the letter and make Ayres think I'm York."

"If he gets onto you, he'll kill you," Harkness muttered. "I don't like it, Dave."

"It's my neck," Dave said, and wheeling, walked to the wagons.

Lela was bending over her cook fire when Dave reached her. He asked, "Got it ready?"

"Almost. What are you going to do?"

"Go down there and pretend I'm Orry."

She stood up, whispering, "Dave, you can't do that."

"I've got to." He took her hands. "It's what we want. I ain't sure we can cut ourselves from our old lives and forget it, but we've got to try."

"All right, Dave," she said. "We'll try."

He went on to his wagon and climbed in, thinking about how it had started with Lela. He had sensed immediately that her life with York was wrong, that she was the unhappiest person he had ever met. Still, she had not tried to make him love her. It was simply that she had wanted to talk to someone, wanted a few moments of relief from the misery that came from living with Orry York.

He took off his clothes and buckled a strap around his waist, working mechanically, his mind on Lela. First it had been casual talk, the kind of talk she might have made with anyone while they were all gathered around the fires and sang or danced. York was always the first to start a song or a dance, and if he had noticed that Lela suddenly brightened with life when she was with Dave, he had ignored it until today.

There had been nothing definite until

one night when Dave was standing guard and Lela had left the wagon circle to take a walk. Dave had stopped her, saying it wasn't safe. So she had lingered, telling him how it had been. She'd married York when she had been young, so young that she'd had no judgment of men, and her folks had been glad to get rid of her. It had made one less mouth to feed. After she had found out what York was, it had been too late to go back home. By that time they were hundreds of miles away.

Lela thought York had a prison record, but she wasn't sure. They had drifted, York working occasionally, or gambling when he had a stake. But that wasn't the trouble. Love was a word York didn't know. To him she was a woman, something for him to use. Nothing more.

"What can I do, Dave?" she had asked him that night. "Is this the way all women live? Isn't there any beauty in life?"

"Lots of beauty," he had told her.

But he had no answer to her first question. If she left York, he would hunt her, and when he found her, he'd kill her. Even if he didn't, how was she to live? After that night, Dave and Lela had avoided each other, not wanting to bring their trouble to a head. Lela was afraid of York, and she would be as long as he was alive.

DAVE hung a knife in a scabbard from the strap and tied it around his right thigh. It was a precaution which he always took when he dived into what looked like trouble. He had been in and out of more tights than he cared to think about, and he had never run into anyone who had thought to look for a knife tied to his leg.

He put his clothes on and buckled his gun belt around him. When he left the wagon, Lela motioned to him. He squatted by her fire and ate from the tin plate she handed him. She sat beside him, her eyes on him.

"You've got to come back," she said softly. "You've just got to."

"I'll come back," he said.

York lay in the shade of Harkness's wagon. Lin Knoll had brought him a plate of food, and when Harkness refused to untie York's hands, Knoll had fed him.

"Knoll didn't need to do that," she said. "I'd have fed him."

"Stay away from him. He'll blame you for his trouble." Dave drank his coffee and got up and, lifting the pot from the coals, filled his cup. "How'd you find out about that letter?"

"I sewed a button on his shirt one night after he had gone to sleep. I read it and then I was afraid to say anything." She stared at the fire. "I didn't think he knew I'd read it because he usually never noticed when I did anything for him like sewing on a button, but he must have or he wouldn't have moved the letter to his undershirt."

"He didn't think you'd tell anybody," Dave said. "A man like Orry counts on everybody being afraid of him."

"He knows I am," she said miserably.

He finished his coffee and tossed the cup to the ground. He looked at her closely, thinking of all the women he had known who had never meant anything to him. Then he had met her and everything was changed. He swung away and walked to where his saddle horse was staked outside the wagon circle.

Harkness came to him when he was tightening the cinch. Harkness asked, "When will you be back?"

"If I'm not back by dark, you'll know I'm in the same shape Bill is," Dave said.

"What good will this do?"

"I figure it'll open the stockade," Dave answered. "If I can pull this off, we'll take the wagons down tomorrow."

Harkness' face was pale. "They'll cut us down as soon as we're inside."

"You can't duck a fight," Dave said. "Somebody will get killed, but I'm thinking that the women can drive all but the lead wagon. You men can hide in it and

when we get inside, you can start the cutting."

"Won't work. Ayres will see the men ain't driving and he'll wonder about it."

"I'll tell him you're bringing the stock." Dave stepped into the saddle. "Anyhow, I'll get a look inside and see how many men he's got. Maybe we can think of something better."

He rode away, raising a hand to Harkness. He looked back before he reached the break in the rim, and saw that Lela was standing outside the wagon circle, watching him. He waved to her and started down the narrow canyon, wondering if he would ever see her again.

Perhaps he had lied when he had told her there was lots of beauty in life. She had not seen it. Perhaps she never would. Now that it was too late, he regretted the things he had not done. He had not even kissed her. He had never held back before with a woman, but it hadn't seemed right with Lela. Not feeling the way he did about her.

The walls closed in on both sides of him. Bringing the wagons down would not be easy, but there were marks of other wheels that had come through here. Probably this was the best way to get into the valley. He wondered if others had tried to settle here, lured by men like York. It was not unusual for a wagon train to start for some unknown destination and simply disappear.

Then another thought struck him that started his heart pounding. York might have lied about Ayres not knowing him. York could have been responsible for these wheel tracks being here. Dave shrugged. To hell with it. Too late now to turn back.

He was out of the narrow canyon then and he followed the tracks that angled back and forth across the slope below the slick rock rim. Steep, but careful driving could bring the wagons down safely.

He thought of his rootless past, and of the decision which had made him buy a wagon and team and start looking for a

ranch. Actually nothing tangible had happened to force him into that decision. It had been inevitable, building in him as he met older men who had thrown away their lives. Suddenly he had realized he was thirty, some of his best years behind him. If he ever settled down, he'd do it now or it would be too late.

WHEN he reached the bottom, he glanced up at the towering cliff above him, wondering if they were watching him as they had watched Bill Starr that morning. Then he touched his roan gelding up and struck off across the grass toward the stockade. No cattle were in sight, only a few horses.

This was a different world from the bleak mesa, closed in by the tall red and buff walls. He reached the creek and pulled up to let his horse drink. Seeing a trout make a dark, flitting shadow as it darted away, he got down and lying belly flat above his horse, lowered his head and drank.

The water was clear and cold, and when he rose and stepped into the saddle, he thought that this was what he wanted. The valley was worth fighting for. If the men on the rim settled here, some would leave in time, for many were the kind who were always looking and were never satisfied with what they had. Well, he'd stay. If he lived.

He rode out of the willows and headed directly for the stockade that was quite close now. No one was in sight. He had not seen anyone when he'd been on the rim. Apparently the place was deserted, but someone had opened the stockade gate for Starr. Ayres was cute. Probably he kept his men under cover so no one looking down on the stockade could guess his strength.

When he was fifty feet from the gate a man yelled, "Pull up, mister."

Dave stopped. Probably there was a catwalk near the top of the stockade, for now

he saw a loophole between the logs just to the right of the gate. A rifle barrel poked through the hole, and behind it Dave glimpsed a man's eyes and nose.

"Open up," Dave shouted. "I want to see Ayres."

"Who are you?"

"York." Nothing happened, and Dave let the man feel his anger. "Damn you, open up. I'm expected."

Slowly the gate swung open and Dave rode in. The gate closed behind him, a heavy bar dropping into place. He reined up and looked back. Two men had closed the gate, the kind of tough-looking hands you'd expect to find in an outlaw hangout.

The man at the loophole said, "Get down, friend, slow and easy, and drop your gun belt."

The fellow's rifle barrel was lined on his chest. Dave got down and looked up at the man. Big and swarthy with a black, short beard. Another tough who could put a slug into a man's belly and not lose a wink of sleep over it.

"Look," Dave said. "Ayres is expecting me. Why should I drop my gun belt?"

"Ask your questions of Jake," the swarthy man said. "I don't give orders but I sure as hell take 'em. Drop that belt pronto."

You didn't argue with a hairpin like that. You obeyed or you died. Dave unbuckled his belt and dropped it. The man said, "Back up. Get his gun, Trigger."

Dave retreated a step, and one of the men at the gate picked up the belt. "Now march him in," the swarthy one said. "We'll find out if Jake's expecting him."

Dave made a turnabout and walked toward the house, taking his time. The log house was unbelievably large, a rectangle built with no attempt at grace or beauty. The barn and sheds and pole corrals enclosing eight or ten horses were little different than Dave had seen on other ranches. A long log bunkhouse stood west of the big house, the door open, but Dave

could not tell whether anyone was inside or not.

The man called Trigger stayed about ten feet behind Dave, his gun in his right hand, Dave's belt dangling from his left. There was no porch and the front door was closed.

"Open the door and go in," Trigger said.

Dave glanced back, scowling. "You're treating me like a damned prisoner. Hope Ayres skins you for this."

"Down here nobody trusts nobody," Trigger said, "and the death rate is plumb high. Keep moving."

He opened the door and went in. The room was immense. Dave stopped, blinking, for the sunlight had been very bright and it seemed dark inside. Trigger shut the door, calling, "Jake, you got another visitor."

For a moment nothing happened. Dave, his eyes becoming accustomed to the thin light, looked around. The floor was smooth, probably used for dancing, and there was little furniture, just homemade chairs and benches and a leather couch in front of a cavernous fireplace. Then Dave saw something that shocked him into immobility, a Gatling gun at one of the front windows. That would be what the Indians had called "lightning thunder."

"Now who the hell are you?"

DAVE was standing motionless, staring at the Gatling gun that covered the area between the house and the stockade gate, shocked by the possibilities. All Ayres had to do was to get his victims bunched out there by the gate. Massacre was the right word. Every man, woman, and child would be cut down before they knew what had hit them.

Trigger's gun barrel prodded Dave in the back. "Talk up, mister."

Dave swung around. "Sorry." He stopped. A man filled a doorway on the west side of the room, filled it and bulged

against the jambs. He was the fattest man Dave had ever seen, his small mouth almost lost behind layers of flesh. "I'm Orry York." He motioned toward the Gatling gun. "I guess I was paralyzed, seeing that."

The fat man laughed, a childish giggle that was surprising, coming from such a mountain of flesh. "It paralyzes quite a few folks, York. Come in."

Dave moved toward him, jerking a hand toward Trigger. "I want to protest about the way I've been treated. They took my gun. Hell, I'm no prisoner."

"You have to be careful," the man said. "I'm Jake Ayres. Come in." He nodded at Trigger who crossed the room and disappeared into the interior of the house. "We had the wrong man come in this morning, York. I'm disappointed in you."

"He's a bullheaded son," Dave said, forcing himself to anger. "I did all I could to stop him, but he was bound to come. I would have aroused suspicion if I'd done anything more to keep him out of the valley."

Ayres stepped back into a small room that seemed to be an office. He eased himself into a reinforced chair behind a desk and leaned back, motioning to a bench. "Sit down."

Dave sat down. Except for a safe in a corner and a shelf of books behind Ayres, the office was as bare as the big living room. He rolled a smoke, feeling the fat man's eyes on him, and he had the rump-tingling sensation that comes to a man when he realizes that the difference between life and death is a nip-and-tuck affair. He was a dead man if he didn't come up with a smart job of acting.

He sealed his cigarette and put it into his mouth, glancing at Ayres. The fat man had a bland, guileless face, his skin as pink as a baby's, and his eyes, almost buried in their deep sockets, were pale blue and seemed very friendly.

"The wagons will come down into the

valley tomorrow." Dave reached into his pocket for a match. "All the boys need is your assurance that there will be no trouble about settling here."

"You will give that to them, of course," Ayres said. "Well, so you hooked up with Lawrence. How is he?"

Touchy now, damned touchy. Lawrence was probably Ayres' brother. "Fine." Dave lighted his cigarette. "Now about the bunch on the rim. They have some stock and the wagons are loaded with supplies. They figure to get through the winter. Several of them have a little money. They expect to buy cattle and drive them into the valley as soon as they are settled."

"It's natural for people to dream, isn't it?"

Dave took York's letter out of his pocket and tossed it on the desk. "I guess you'll want to see that just to prove who I am."

Ayres glanced at it and nodded. "Funny about Lawrence. When he heard the Utes were being moved out, he got scared and left, but he promised to send some suckers this way. From what you tell me, I guess he did." Ayres shook his head. "He should have stayed, though. This is still a good paying proposition as long as I can get supplies without attracting attention."

"How strong are you?"

"Thanks to Mr. Gatling, I'm a mountain of strength. I have four boys in the bunkhouse who held up a train and rode in here a week ago. They'll fight if I need them." He tapped fat fingers on the desk, then asked, "Any young women in your outfit?"

"Several."

"Good. I like to keep a few. Makes the boys better satisfied."

Ayres looked past Dave toward the door. Dave turned his head. Bill Starr was standing there, staring at Dave. He cried out, "Donovan!"

Dave swung back to Ayres. He had lost. This was a turn he had not foreseen.

Ayres was laughing in his childish giggle. "So you're not York after all."

CHAPTER THREE

Lost Hope

AYRES' guileless face had not changed expression. Trigger stood behind Starr with his gun in his hand. For a moment Dave considered diving across the desk at the fat man, a thought born of desperation, for he had no hope of life. He gave the notion up at once. If he made a wrong move, Trigger would shoot him in the back.

"Looks like my hand played out," Dave said.

"I didn't know," Starr said dully. "What's York got to do with this?"

"Everything." Dave rose and moved aside so that he stood with his back to the wall, wondering if he could get his hands on his knife. "He had a deal with Ayres to fetch our outfit here so Ayres could get the supplies."

The fat man's hands hung at his sides. Now he raised one of them, big hand gripping a long-barreled Colt that he lined on Dave. "If you have a crazy notion about tackling me, forget it. Either way you die, but I never kill a man until I'm sure I have no use for him. That's why Starr is still alive. If you behave, you live a little longer. If you don't, you get it now. Savvy?"

"Seems right plain."

"I like killing," Ayres went on. "Satisfies a hunger in me. They say God gives life, but Jake Ayres takes it away. That makes me equal to God, doesn't it?"

The man was crazy, but you couldn't tell by looking at his pink-skinned face or his blue eyes. Dave said, "Reckon it does."

"Another hunger I have is for money. I'm giving myself one more year here and then I'll move on. Whoever wants the valley can have it, but it won't be you or your

friends. Now just what happened to York?"

"He's tied up in camp."

"How did you get onto him?"

"I had a fight with him today and we found your letter."

Ayres wagged his great head in disapproval. "The one kind of man I can't stand is a failure. It seems that Lawrence was mistaken about him."

"Our wagons won't come into the valley," Dave said. "You'll never get them."

Ayres scratched his front chin. "I'll get them, but it'll take a little thought. Women, supplies, money, and horses. Yes, I'll have to have them. Starr, come in here and stand beside Donovan."

Starr obeyed, cursing sullenly. Trigger moved into the room, focusing his questioning eyes on Ayres who was staring at Dave. The fat man said, "I have a few good points. One of them is my dislike for torture. I favor a neat, quick job."

"That's kind," Dave murmured. "Real kind."

"Look him over, Trigger," Ayres said. "If you tackle him, Donovan, Starr dies. Keep that in mind."

"Damn his ornery soul," Starr burst out. "Don't hold back on account of me, Dave."

Trigger felt Dave, patting him under the arms and feeling his pockets, then running a hand down his back and along his sides. He stepped away, missing the knife on Dave's leg, and Dave breathed easier.

"Why didn't you grab him?" Starr demanded. "He had a gun."

"He didn't want you to die," Ayres said easily. "Some men are cursed with a soft spot which eventually kills them." He laid his Colt on the desk. Trigger had moved to the other side of the door, his gun in his hand again. "Lock them up," Ayres ordered. "I have to think about this."

Trigger jerked his head at the door. "Move."

Starr and Dave left the office, crossed

the living room, and went along a gloomy hall and down a flight of stairs into a cellar, with Trigger a few feet behind them. A lantern hung from a beam, throwing its murky light against the black, dirt walls. The door swung shut, a padlock clicked, and Trigger's steps sounded on the stairs and died.

Starr gripped Dave's arm. "What the hell happened up there?"

Dave told him, adding, "You fell into York's scheme, Bill. You fell head first."

STARR began pacing around the cellar, cursing. A faint glimmer of light from the lantern came through a small hole near the top of the door. The outside room was small, just an entryway into the larger prison room. Dave shoved against the door. It was heavy and solid, and when he drew away and drove a shoulder against it, he bounced back, feeling no give.

"Don't bust yourself up," Starr growled. "I did, but it's no use."

"This room go anywhere?"

"Hell no. Just a hole in the ground." Starr went on with his pacing. "I've been told I was too bullheaded to listen to anybody, and I guess this proves it."

"We'll get out," Dave said.

"Yeah, to die. That hombre's crazy as a loon. They let me in this morning, pleasant as you please. Ayres quizzed me about what we had, supplies and all, and I began getting wise. I might have been all right if I'd played stupid, but I got tough with him and the next thing I knew Trigger had a gun in my back."

Dave pulled his knife out of its scabbard and handed it to Starr. "We've got this, Bill."

Starr gave it back. "No good. That door's too thick to cut through."

"I've got a better idea than that. Did they bring you any dinner?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Who brought it?"

"Trigger."

"Then we'll probably get some supper. When he brings it, you reach for it but let the plate go. Grab him and I'll let him feel the point of the knife. He'll open the door if you can hold him."

"I can hold him all right." Starr moved to the door and put his arm through the hole. "Big enough. Won't do no good, though. We'd never get out of this damned stockade."

"Ayres will take us. That ain't what worries me."

"Worries me," Starr snapped. "I should have smelled skunk on that York hombre. You know how it was there at Green River. After we got a look at the land we didn't want it. York showed up talking about this valley. Well, I figured it wouldn't hurt to see about it. I knew we had to go to some God-forsaken spot to get good land, somewhere nobody else wanted to go, but I never dreamed of a deal like this."

"Nobody would," Dave said.

"It's fantastic. It's unbelievable." Starr beat a fist against the door. "Seems like I'm drunk. Or having a nightmare. I've balled things up from the word go."

This was the first self-condemnation Dave had ever heard from Bill Starr. If they got out of this, he would be a better man for it. If they got out! Dave rolled a smoke and lighted it, trying to find some hope in his plan of getting out, but he was not as confident as he let Starr think.

"What will that crazy fool do?" Starr demanded. "He won't sit on his rump and let the wagons pull out."

"I'm wondering what Harkness and the rest will do," Dave said.

"Come morning they'll roll out," Starr snapped.

"Maybe not. If they do tackle this place, Ayres will open the gate, and when they get in, he'll turn the Gatling gun loose on 'em."



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"Or maybe take his men up there and knock 'em over." Starr began to swear again, almost hysterical. "I'm telling you, Dave, this ain't real. Can't be."

"Real enough," Dave said. "I rode the owlhoot when I was young and crazier'n I am now, and I heard about spots like this. Different, of course, but places where the Wild Bunch could hole up."

"But nobody knew anything about this valley," Starr said.

"Lot of unexplored country around here. Plumb to the New Mexican line and over into Utah. Take the Robber's Roost country. Not a good place for sheriffs, so they stay away."

Starr grunted and was silent. Suddenly both men were out of talk. The minutes piled up and made hours. There was no judging of time, for neither Dave nor Starr had a watch. Perhaps it was dusk now, or completely dark. There was just the thin trickle of light from the lantern outside, and suddenly Dave was aware that tension had gripped him, that every nerve was a prickle of apprehension.

More than anything else it was the sense of absolute helplessness that worried him. He turned his knife over in his hand, finding no assurance in it. A futile hope. Maybe he should be digging at the door. He thought of Lela and what would happen to her. If York got free. . .

"Listen." Starr grabbed his arm. "Somebody's coming down the stairs."

Dave shoved Starr toward the door and took a position beside him. "Say something about being hungry when you reach for the plate, but don't take it. Just grab him."

"Sure, sure," Starr said.

Then despair hit Dave. The man outside hadn't brought supper. Instead he was unlocking the door. He swung it open, the hinges squealing. It was Trigger, standing under the lantern in the cone of downthrown light, with a gun in his hand.

"Come on, both of you," Trigger said

harshly. "Jake's got it figured. He's letting you go. Quite a surprise, ain't it?"

Trigger could not see Dave. Starr began to curse, and Trigger shouted, "Shut up."

"Go on." Dave moved back into the room so that he was out of the light. "It's a trick, but maybe we can think of one of our own."

Trigger laughed. "If you think you can put anything over. . ."

STARR went through the door and turned toward the stairs, and the instant he stepped away from Trigger, Dave threw the knife. It came out of the darkness like a silver arrow. Trigger saw it too late. He tried to jump aside, instinctively throwing a shot at Dave that barely missed, but the knife got him in the chest. Starr wheeled and jumped him, Trigger's knees giving under him. He went down, Starr on top of him, grabbing the gun out of slack fingers.

"He's finished." Starr got up. "You're handy with that pig sticker, boy."

Dave was through the door when Starr got to his feet. "It's come in handy more'n once." He took the gun from Starr. "I'm handy with a hogleg, too, Bill."

Starr didn't argue. Dave stooped and yanked the knife out of Trigger. He wiped it on his pants leg, and when he turned, Starr was already halfway up the stairs.

"Wait!" Dave called.

"Wait, hell!" Starr shouted. "All I want to do is to get my hands on Ayres' fat neck."

"And get both of us killed," Dave said angrily. "I told you to wait."

Starr was not a man to take orders, but he did now, staring down at Dave who had slipped the knife under his waistband. Starr said doubtfully, "Maybe you know what to do."

"I know we're dealing with a tricky sidewinder. No use stepping into something now that we've got this far." Dave

started up the stairs. "Let's see how the land lies."

Starr went on, then he stopped. He said in a low voice, "Suppose Ayres heard that shot?"

"He couldn't, down here like it was."

Again Starr went on, not stopping until he reached the hall, Dave a step behind him. The light was very thin; the door that opened into the big living room was closed. Dave caught Starr by the arm. "Let me go ahead."

In a sullen fit of rebellion, Starr said, "You've got the knife and the gun. What do you want me to do, bite him?"

"I'll get you a gun," Dave said, and moved past Starr and went along the hall.

He stopped when he reached the door, aware that someone was yelling outside the house. He paused, his left hand on the knob, and slowly turned it. Very gently he eased the door open a crack, and held it there, for he heard Orry York shout, "I couldn't help it, Ayres. I was lucky to get away with my life."

"You're no good to me now," Ayres said. "One thing I don't stand for is failure."

The burly man outside at the stockade gate was yelling, "They're coming, Jake. There's a woman leading 'em."

His words were drowned out by a burst of gunfire in the living room. Starr shoved at Dave, saying, "Go on, damn it, go on."

"Don't hurry this," Dave said.

He opened the door another six inches. York was down on his face, and Ayres was lumbering across the room to the front door. He shouted, "Make 'em get off their horses outside, Brawly. Keep your rifle on 'em and fetch 'em in. Get 'em bunched for Mr. Gatling."

Dave slammed the door open and moved into the room, calling, "Hook the moon, Fatty."

Ayres whirled, moving fast for a man of his size, but he had no time to fire. Dave let him have it in his stomach, then laced

a second bullet into him as he began to wilt. He spilled forward on his face, a great mountain of flesh, lying motionless within ten feet of Orry York.

"Get his gun, Bill," Dave shouted, and ran to the door.

The sun was almost down, shadows covering the interior of the stockade. When Dave went through the door, Brawly, on the catwalk by the gate, threw a slug that hit him in the side and knocked him off his feet. Starr had picked up Ayres' gun. Dave heard his shot; he tried to get up but there was no strength in his legs.

HE STILL held his gun. He had fallen with his head toward the bunkhouse. The owlhoot crew inside poured into the yard, but the first shot from Dave's gun sent them leaping back into the safety of the bunkhouse.

"I got that hombre by the gate," Starr shouted. "Got him in the guts."

Dave felt blood flow out of the wound in his side but he didn't know how hard he had been hit. He remembered there was another man around somewhere. The stockade gate was still closed, and if Starr crossed the yard to open it, he'd be cut down from the bunkhouse.

He said, "Bill."

But Starr had already started toward the stockade gate. Outside Harkness was shouting, "Open up. Open up."

"Get back, Bill," Dave called. "Damn it, get back here!"

Starr dived toward the house, suddenly realizing he'd be in the open. "Hell, I forgot about that bunch in the bunkhouse. Keep 'em nailed down, Dave."

Another shot hammered out from the corner of the house. Starr spun and fell. This was the other man Dave had missed. He got himself turned as another shot kicked up dust a foot from his head; he saw the man hugging the log wall and pulled trigger. Blackness moved in around him as he saw the man go down.

When Dave came to he was lying on the couch. The room seemed full of people. He tried to lift his head and felt pain knife through him, then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and he heard Lela say, "Easy, Dave, easy."

He looked at her, trying to remember what had happened, then he saw Harkness and the others grouped around the Gatling gun. He asked, "Bill?"

"He's hit," Lela said, "but he'll be all right."

She must know about Orry, he thought. She was sitting beside the couch, the lamp-light from the table falling on the side of her face.

Apparently she sensed the question that was in his mind, for she nodded, her face grave.

"I know about Orry," she said. "I guess it's wrong to feel the way I do, but I'm glad, Dave. Harkness would have hanged him."

"How'd he get away?"

"Knoll cut him loose. Nobody was watching. Knoll was shot, but Orry got a horse. We started after him, and, well, once we got down into the valley, it seemed like we had to keep going."

Harkness came to the couch and stood looking down at Dave. "We did it, Dave," he said, "although now that I think about

it, I'm scared right down to my boot heels."

"Some of the boys lifted Hank over the stockade," Lela said. "He opened the gate. Took a lot of courage, not knowing what was inside."

Harkness gave Dave a wry grin. "I tell you I was scared. Still am. Good thing the bunch in the bunkhouse didn't want to fight. They're gone."

"Outlaws," Dave said. "You should have kept 'em."

"I didn't know that," Harkness said, "but I don't care much. If the sheriff didn't want 'em bad enough to keep after 'em, dunno why we should deliver 'em. Good riddance, I say." He took a long breath. "Well, Dave, you were right. What's worth having is worth fighting for."

You never really knew what was in a man until the last blue chip was down. Dave had seen this happen many times. Men who pretended to have guts didn't have it in the pinch, and sometimes those who thought they didn't have it did. A few hours before Dave wouldn't have bet ten cents on Harkness coming over the stockade.

Dave looked at Lela. He said, "Yeah, we've got what we want." In time he would have what he wanted, too. ■ ■ ■

SPIRIT OF THE SPIDER

THERE HAVE BEEN customers who bought Navajo blankets, and upon examining them, have found a single small hole in the center of that most wonderful piece of handicraft. Many have complained of this dropped stitch or flaw, not knowing its significance.

The hole in the center of a Navajo blanket is its mark of being genuine, and it developed out of the legend about the origin of the blanket.

According to the old Indian legend, a spider taught the first Navajo woman to weave, and she immediately became known as the Spider Woman. And like the Spider, who taught them the craft, and who leaves a hole in his web through which to enter, the Navajo women always leave a hole in the blanket she weaves so that the spirit of the Spider can enter or leave her web whenever he chooses.

Echols



"I'm goin' in and side Hefty," Scalpy said, "You watch the door—and kill anything that looks like a Carlton."

By Doc Winchester

Long Seven Heads North

STEVE HENDERSON'S stocky frame was dejected as he slumped over his desk. His blue eyes were bleak and his good-natured heart was heavy. As sheriff of Thunder Bird County he had just killed two men. The dead men had been members of the Nick Carlton crew whose hideout was on Thunder Bird Rim. The presence of the two men in the cow town of Box Elder was in defiance of Steve's orders that all members of the Carl-

ton gang would avoid the county of Thunder Bird in general and the town of Box Elder in particular. The brothers, Tom and Nat Slade, were Nick Carlton's answer to that order. They had ridden their horses through the batwing doors of the Box Elder Saloon, shot the bartender, destroyed property and generally flouted the reign of the new sheriff.

Now both men were dead. Glancing across the yard of the jail house, Steve saw a group of men carrying the bodies of Tom and Nat Slade to the undertaker's. The good natured-grin that was a part of his homely face was absent, and his mouth sagged at the corners. He not only didn't

green eyes. Then he pulled the wide-brimmed hat off his head with a sweep.

Steve stiffened in his chair as if he had been shot with a .45. The man in front of him had been scalped! The white bones of his skull, free from a sign of scalp or hair, glistened in the light.

"Comical as hell!" the Texan said. "Apaches. Don't look so bad though—off a piece." He slid his hat back on his head. "The boys call me Scalpy. What did they say your name was, son?"

"Steve. Steve Henderson."

"You jiggering this law game alone?"

"I got one deputy. Tim Anders. He took a little swing up to the Thunder Bird

There was something in the way Scalpy handled that razor-edged hand axe that gave Steve a writhing knot in his guts.

like the killing but he also knew the Carlton crew would descend in retaliation.

His eyes focused on the figure of a tall, gangling man coming towards the office. The man's frame filled the doorway and he stooped his head to enter. He was so tall that Steve had to tip his head back to look into his face. Above the green silk handkerchief around the thin, bony neck, Steve saw a growth of stubby red beard, a hawk-beaked nose and a pair of green eyes that looked into Steve's without wavering. His wide, thin-lipped mouth was twisted in a one-sided grin that gave his rascally looks a flavor of good nature.

"You got the right idea, son." His voice had a twang of Texas in it. "Never let a feller get close enough t' do damage before you look him over." The grin was part friendly, part critical.

Steve's face colored.

"Thanks for the warning, stranger. Next time I'll keep my eyes open."

"Wouldn't mind hookin' up with you as deputy, son." The Texan sat down, crossed his long legs and looked at Steve with his

Rim this morning. I'm looking for him back soon."

"He'll be back with a hole in his gizzard," Scalpy stated. He pulled a flat quart bottle of whiskey from his pocket. He wrenched at the cork and passed it to Steve.

"Thanks," Steve said. "I don't drink. You don't need to let that stop you."

"I wasn't aimin' to." He tipped the bottle to his mouth and took a long drink of the raw whiskey.

There was something about this Texan that Steve liked. He needed all the help he could get after killing the two Slades. But there was something a little funny about a stranger coming into Box Elder and offering his services as a deputy.

"Box Elder," Steve said, "would make a pretty good place for a feller on the wrong side of the law to hole up for a spell. He wouldn't be troubled with lawmen following him past the Thunder Bird Rim. Some one, say, with a bounty on his hide."

Scalpy took another pull at the bottle, drinking it down like water. "Never drink except in good company, son. I never

hoisted her once between here and El Paso. Purty strip o' country, that." He turned and looked at Steve intensely. "Whatever you got on your mind, son, forget it. If I'd wanted t' kill you, I'd a-done it a long time ago!"

Scalpy had been sitting in the chair, one hand gripping the bottle, the other punctuating his talk. Now his fingers were circling the butt of a long-barreled six-shooter. The gun barrel was carelessly describing a tiny circle around the third button of Steve's shirt. There was a comical grin on the Texan's mouth.

"It takes practice, son. You'll get her down pat in time. That play with the Slade brothers shows you got what it takes. With me sidin' with you, showin' you some o' the fine points o' the game, you might turn out t' be a fair t' middlin' sheriff."

Steve grinned wide and honest. "You might make a good deputy at that, Scalpy. Give me time to think it over."

"Don't bust a ham string rushin' the idea, son."

STEVE'S office was in one corner of the thick-walled, adobe jail. It also served him as a bed room. The built-in bunk faced the jail corridor. From his bunk he could see the row of cells that lined both sides of the building.

One of these cells, halfway down the corridor, was now occupied by Scalpy. This favor had been conferred on the Texan at his own request. "Throw me in the clink, son," he had said, after finishing the quart of cactus whisky, "and throw the key in the creek. I hain't had a good night's sleep for a month." Scalpy had stretched his long frame out on the hard floor and was sound asleep by the time Steve had spread a blanket over him.

Night came and Steve turned in for some sleep. It was after midnight when he awoke. The sound of shod horses brought him to his feet. He put on his boots and jerked

his overalls over them, swung his holstered guns about his middle and gazed out as he poked his shirt tail in.

In the dim starlight he could see the outlines of the buildings fronted by lines of hitchracks. Four men were stepping from in front of the Stockman's Bank after looking through the window. Steve's mind raced as he stepped in front of the jail. He felt pretty certain the four men at the bank were a decoy to lead him out. They didn't plan a robbery; they were just leading him out, bringing him within ambush range. It was pretty certain that others of the Carlton Bunch would be circling the jail, playing it from all sides.

He opened a crack of the door easily without squeaking the hinges. He could hear Scalpy snoring in the cell. Moving like a cat he passed to the north side of the building. To the left was the adobe barn and the pole corral where he and Tim Anders kept their string. He listened for any unusual sounds from the horses that would betray the presence of strangers. Twilight, his private horse, was sneezing cheerfully over a manger of hay. Steve moved soundlessly in the night shadow of the jail. Suddenly Twilight's blazed face appeared over the gate. The rangy, little pony was acting strange. His short, *crop* ears were pointed forward. Steve turned his head in the direction of the pony's gaze. His muscles jerked to a taut attention. A slow-gated horse had turned out of the street and was headed for the feed corral. Steve knew that stocking-footed sorrel as well as he knew the limp body, arms and legs dangling from the saddle, was his deputy, Tim Anders.

Steve exploded into action. He felt the sorrel brace his legs as he hauled Tim's dead weight in one sweeping heave. His face twisted with the hate that a man of decent instincts feels for a bushwhacker. His brain was seared with the desire to kill. He hauled Tim's carbine from the saddle boot. Caution left him. He levered a cartridge in-

to the barrel. A strip of open space between the jail and the corral offered the only spot from which he could see the Stockman's Bank. It was also a spot that offered the Carlton's something to shoot at. One of the four riders was still in front of the bank. Steve recognized his outline—a foul-mouthed blackguard that was one of Carlton's top gunmen. Steve yelled at him, his voice bouncing from the buildings in echo.

"Here I am, you yellow son!"

The man swung his horse, gun chopping a shot that showed the deadly accuracy of the man's aim. Steve's finger was squeezing the trigger of the carbine as the bullet from across the street jerked his shirt. Steve's shot hit the mark, and the man slid from the saddle. The dark blob lay still as the spooked horse bucked the empty saddle.

Hell broke loose. Ambush lead ripped at Steve's clothes; a deadening thud rocked him to his boot heels. Then he was on his hands and knees fishing in the dirt for his gun. His brain cleared and he lifted one of the six-shooters, triggering the hammer.

The horses in the corral were circling the enclosure in a wild run, scared by the fight. A cloud of dust rose from their feet. Steve made a staggering run for the corral. That dust cloud was something he could use. He fell through the poles of the corral watching for a space to duck to the center of the milling string. Lead began to spatter the side of the jail and Steve knew they had lost him. Then he saw a dust-dim form along the outside of the corral. The blurry form lunged as Steve's gun spit a red line through it.

A horse snorted with pain and fell in a rolling sprawl as Steve's shot drew a rain of lead into the spooked horses. The horses were falling over the one that lay with its head under it. They splintered the poles of the enclosure as they lunged against them. They cleared the corral leaving Steve in a cloud of dust. He pulled his other gun and dropped behind the body of the dead

horse, holding his breath as he listened.

He could hear cursing and yells of pain that were not accounted for by his own shooting. He was conscious that someone was helping him from the east side of the stable. Stabs of flame were cutting into the Carltons from their rear. Scattered, bunchy shadows were breaking from cover and darting into brush farther from the jail.

Whoever it was out there in the darkness was shifting his position so fast that the streaks from his hammering gun were twenty feet apart.

In a few minutes the shooting stopped suddenly. The Carlton's were calling it a day.

Steve filled the cylinders of both his guns and then he became aware that he was blood-soaked and that pain ate at his shoulder.

"Keep a hold on yourself, son."

Steve recognized the crackling voice of Scalpy calling from his hideout.

Steve dragged his body along the ground to the brush clump where Scalpy and his long-barreled .44 were hidden.

Scalpy was sitting on his haunches, and Steve could see the corner of the Texan's mouth turned up in his lop-sided grin.

"Just letting everything else ride, Scalpy, mind telling me how you got out of that cell?"

"That's rithmattick, son. When you was a-rassling me around, tryin' t' get me on the bed, I swiped the keys out o' your pocket. Never was much of a hand to be shut up that a-way."

Steve slapped his empty pocket.

"Anytime you want t' raise a corner o' hell, son, I'll be right there t' put a chunk under it."

"You'll do to ride the river, Scalpy," and Steve grinned in the dark.

IT WAS after they had carried Tim's body and placed it in the corridor that Scalpy noticed Steve's bloody shirt.

"If you got a bullit hole, son, you better

fill her with wagon dope," Scalpy offered kindly.

"You go after Doc Adams, Scalpy, while I talk to that bunch outside."

A crowd of men had gathered in the street, roused by the sound of the fight. Some were punchers from outlying outfits, staying in town for the night, but mostly the group were businessmen of Box Elder.

Steve explained briefly what had happened. The undertaker was in the crowd and Steve sent him with others to take a look for dead Carlton's, and to take Tim's body to his establishment. Doc Adams was in the crowd with his medicine kit in his hand. Scalpy spotted him by his gear and motioned to him.

Steve finished his talk with a glance at Scalpy. "Folks, this hungry-looking Texan is my new deputy. I just hired him."

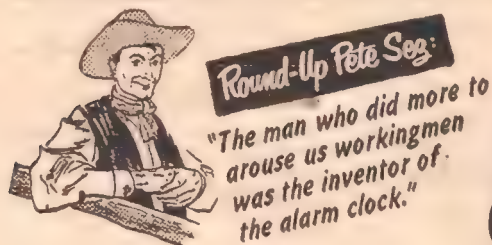
After Steve was patched up and Doc Adams was gone, the sheriff turned to his new deputy.

"Thanks for backing my play tonight, Scalpy. Now, just for the hell of it, how about laying your cards on the table?"

"Meanin' what, son?"

"Either a man's a damn fool or he's got reasons for throwing in with a sheriff that's flirting with the Thunder Bird crew. I don't think you're a damn fool."

"Come t' think o' it, I got a reason fer spreadin' my blankets in your camp, son. I'm needin' a right smart o' backin myself! I smell trouble." Scalpy paused and then continued slowly. "Back on the Staked Plains a-piece is a herd o' three thousand long-horned steers. They're wearin' the Long Seven brand and its pointed north. We'll see their dust by morning. My job is t' deliver 'em t' the Rocky Mountain Cattle Company. This country means Nick Carlton and that curly wolf means hell. Right now that lqbo is plannin' t' steal the whole drive. I heard plenty in El Paso a few days back."



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"The trail herd started across the Plains short-handed. Six punchers, a horse wrangler, a night-hawk, and feller named Dutch Oven, as cook. The feller that pointin' her nose is new t' the country and most o' the hands is handier with a gun than they is with nursin' dogies. Fer all I know half o' 'em might be workin' fer Nick Carlton. Added together, son, she spells one hell o' a mess. Here's my hole card, son—you help me get that trail herd t' San Jose and around the Thunder Bird Rim, and I'll help you clean out the Carlton gang."

Steve's eyes raked the long-geared Texan. "I'm buying chips, Scalpy, just to show you my heart is in the right place. But for the tally book I think you're a damn liar." Steve softened his words with a grin.

Scalpy grinned right back at him but he didn't answer.

"You could have taken the Jim Stinson Trail that branches west from the Goodnight and Loving Trail at Fort Sumner which hits the Colorado River at Socorro and heads you for Wyoming. You know that trail, Scalpy just like I know it." Steve's eyes bored into the green ones of Scalpy. "For some reason you haven't mentioned, you're putting that trail herd right in the curly wolf's pasture. You're asking for trouble, you're going out of your way to borrow it. Like I said, I'm riding along, but I'm doing it blindfolded. It's your deal, Scalpy—twist the cards!"

Scalpy hadn't taken his eyes off Steve but there was a new light in them. He decided the word "son" didn't exactly fit the sheriff.

"What say we tail up that Chink cook, Steve? Take on a bait o' early breakfast and ride out for a look-see. Come daylight we ought t' see dust."

THE Twilight horse and Tim's sorrel had gotten over their spook and were standing hipshot at the feed manger. Steve

saddled Twilight, and Scalpy threw his gear on Tim's sorrel as his own mount had broken out with the frightened remuda.

They ate and Steve left a note with the Chinese cook addressed to Doc Adams. Doc, in addition to his medical practice, was mayor of Box Elder. Steve wrote him about the dead horse in the corral and asked him to get the barn man to wrangle the strays.

The two rode south from town. It was the darkest part of the night, with only a few stars in the blue-black sky.

"They'll be easin' off the bed ground pronto," Scalpy said. "They camped dry last night, and longhorns don't bed easy when they been on a long trail without water."

Daylight came fast after the first streak of gray. Against the horizon they could see a cloud of dust slowly lifting above the flat plains. They rode with stirrup rings touching.

Two riders crossed the trail ahead. They pulled up their horses and waited as Steve and Scalpy rode up.

"Either of you fellers doin' the hirin' fer that herd yonder?" the bigger of the two men asked.

"What's your names?" Scalpy questioned.

"We're the Haden boys. Me 'an him's brothers." They both grinned.

"He's Hank," the big one went on. "My front name's Crusty, fer some reason."

"If you fellers is brothers me an' Steve here is the Siwash Twins." Scalpy pulled off his hat and hung it on the saddle horn.

"Gawdamighty!" gasped the Haden boys.

Scalpy took his time putting the hat back on his head.

"Either you boys know a hombre by the name o' Nick Carlton?" The Texan's eyes bored into the one called Crusty.

"Cain't say we do." Crusty's eyes were glued to the white skull. "We don't know a feller by the name o' Nick Carlton, do we

Hank?" he asked, still staring at Scalpy. "Never heard tell o' him," Hank answered.

"You fellers is lucky," Scalpy said. "You'll be a damn sight more lucky if she pans out the way you're tellin' it."

"We want fightin' wages," Crusty said.

Scalpy took a tally book out of his pocket and wrote in the names of the two Haden Boys. "You're hired. Pick up the herd and put 'em on the Pecos river at San Jose. You can make it by noon."

The Haden boys swung their horse. On the back of their saddles were yellow slickers, bunched like they were wrapped around warsacks. They rode with the easy lope of experienced cow hands.

"Them fellers is either workin' fer me or Nick Carlton," Scalpy said.

"Thanks for the information, Scalpy. That clears her up. You must of been born with the knack of explaining things."

"Comical as hell, Steve. Comical like ridin' into an Apache war camp with a couple o' Injin scalps hangin' from your saddle."

Steve and Scalpy watched the rising dust of the trail herd. In his own mind Steve had a picture of the moving string. His own days on the trail made the picture clear and bright. By noon at San Jose, Dutch Oven would have the team hauling the chuck wagon turned loose, the table leaf end of the wagon down, and dinner cooking for the punchers. Like all roundup cooks, old Dutch Oven would be fast and ornery. On top of the bed wagon the night-hawk would be sleeping. The team of mules pulling the bed wagon would be following the chuck wagon. When the wagon stopped the night-hawk would roll off, drag the harness from the mules, throw his bed under the wagon and be sound asleep by the time Dutch Oven started to rattle his pots and pans.

"They're movin' fast now, Steve," Scalpy said.

Billows of dust rose high, the wagons

came into sight, and they could hear the yell of the punchers.

THE river was wide and shallow at the point Steve and Scalpy picked for the trail camp. Lush grass grew along the banks and back into the desert. Just across the river was the little town of San Jose.

Sitting their horses, watching the mile long string of wagons and stock, Steve asked, "Who's bossing the herd, Scalpy?"

"Feller by the name o' Hefty Summers. By rights Hefty should o' been hung a long time ago. The worst thing about Hefty is, he gets lost easy. Don't know where he's at. Once on a bear hunt me an' Hefty was on, he goes down t' the creek fer a pail o' water. Didn't get back fer three days."

When the wagons pulled up Scalpy swung his big hat at Dutch Oven, spotting the camp ground for him. Dutch Oven swung the team and pulled the wagon under a big cottonwood tree.

Dutch Oven climbed down over the wagon wheel.

"The town across the river there," Scalpy informed the salty cook, "is called San Jose. You'll do your drinkin' on creek water, Dutch."

The night-hawk had turned the mules loose and kicked his bed to the ground.

"Hells bells, Scalpy," the cook complained. "You cain't expect a man t' cross that gawdfersaken country and not cut the alkali out of his gullet, do you?"

"Pecos water'll cut it, Dutch," Scalpy said kindly.

Cussing the outfit, the cook dragged the leather from his team and wrenched the table leaf of the chuck wagon open.

Ropes slapping, chanting a song, the Haden Boys were riding the point of the trail herd. Scalpy's grin twisted his face. He knew cow hands when he saw them work. The wind was at their back and the dust moved in clouds ahead of them. Yet

without bother or fuss they were moving a range count of three thousand head of Texas steers to feed and water.

The leaders of the trail herd buried their heads in the water, fanned out as the herd moved in. In half an hour they were feeding up and down the river.

Hefty Summers rode up on a moon-eyed bay. He grinned good naturedly as he shook hands with Steve. He pulled his saddle and turned the bay loose to join the remuda.

"The cow hands you hired in El Paso, Scalpy," Hefty said. "Is about as useless as hair on a horned toad."

"Ornery, too, I guess," Scalpy answered.

"Ornery as hell. I'd a gut shot the whole slue o' 'em and come on alone if I hadn't o' been lost."

While they were eating most of the punchers stayed to themselves. They carried their heaped-up plates away from the wagon and scraped most of it off in the bunch grass. It was the way they had of showing Dutch Oven what they thought of his cooking. They didn't rib Dutch Oven to his face because a pot hook in the hands of a ringey cook is a lethal weapon.

The night-hawk got up and was shaving in a piece of broken glass tacked to the side of the wagon. He was dressed in a pair of new levis, a gray flannel shirt and bench-tooled boots. The town of Sam Jose looked good to the lank-bellied, long-geared night-hawk.

"No use wastin' you time lookin' for that shavin' lotion, Slim," Hefty informed him. "Me an' old Dutch Oven made a hot toddy out o' it." The night-hawk and Dutch Oven were the only men in the outfit that the trail boss joshed with.

Sitting on his boot heels Steve had a good chance to look over the Long Seven crew. Hefty and the night-hawk he tallied all right. The Haden boys he figured on the right side of the tally book. The rest of the crew added up to a motley seven. They came up to Scalpy's description: border renegades, backwash of the outlaw trail that

stretched from Canada to old Mexico. Some of them might be in with Nick Carlton; the majority, Steve figured, were using the trail job to get away from Texas Rangers and get north to the Hole-in-the-Wall. Scalpy had sure picked himself some tough hands.

Steve tossed his plate and cup into the dishpan. He was pretty well satisfied they would stick with the Long Seven in a fight.

Scalpy straddled the bed wagon tongue and fished a hatchet out of the jockey box. He tested the edge with his thumb.

"I'm glommin' on this hatchet before Dutch Oven uses her t' chop up meat bones," he told Steve.

Scalpy had sharpened and honed that hatchet until it had the edge of a butcher knife. There was something in the way Scalpy handled that hand axe that gave Steve a writhing knot in his guts.

The punchers were throwing leather on their mounts, their eyes on San Jose. Just across the river there would be saloons, girls to dance with, whiskey to drink, and a piano jingling to the clink of glasses. Most important of all would be the dark-eyed, black-haired senioritas who would curry the burrs out of their manes.

"The first feller that shows up drunk gets a gun barrel bent over his skull," Scalpy called.

Wide grins under Stetson hats greeted Scalpy's orders, but they were tempered with respect.

Steve and Scalpy saddled up. Scalpy tied the hatchet to his saddle, blade to the rear to keep from cutting his chaps. They rode to the river. The ford was shallow; wetting their horses a little above the fetlocks. Along the one street of San Jose Long Seven horses were lined up at the hitchrack fronting the Border Saloon.

"The boys ain't lost any time gettin' started with their town chores," Scalpy said.

Yells and hoots came out of the saloon mixed with the tinkling noise of a piano.

The door of the saloon was open and they could see couples dancing and the punchers joshing each other.

THERE was a long line bellied up to the bar. Scalpy fished some crumpled bills out of his pocket and bought a quart of border whisky. Steve and Scalpy moved to the back of the saloon where they could watch the front. Scalpy took a long drink of the rotgut whisky. A Mexican girl came to their table. Scalpy pulled off his hat and laid it on the floor. The girl saw the hatless head and backed away screaming. Even life in a Border saloon hadn't made her immune to a sight like the Texan's hairless, scalpless skull.

The saloon was filled with a bunch of tough-looking hombres. There wasn't any doubt in Steve's mind that Scalpy had called the play. Nick Carlton was planning a raid on the trail herd. He recognized a dozen of Carlton's men. He wished he could spot Nick Carlton, see if he looked as tough as his rep made him. He often wondered what the outlaw looked like. Well, he would probably find out before the play was over. . . .

Scalpy settled back in his chair after another pull at the bottle. He looked at Steve for a long time.

"About twenty years ago," Scalpy said, "there was a feller who drifted into the West Texas country from the Injin Territory. He was drivin' a Bain wagon hooked up t' a team o' mules. Bows and tarp cover against the wind and rain. This feller had his wife along. About as purty as you'd care t' look at. Straw-colored hair, eyes as blue as the Texas lupins. They'd ride along and dream-about the ranch they was goin' t' have on ahead. Always kept a-lookin', and never seemin' t' find the right spot. Then one day in the bend o' the Rio Grande they finds it. They both knowed it was the place. There was no auguin', they just piled out o' the wagon and a-fore they turned the mules loose they knowed

where the house was eventually goin' t' be.

"It wasn't long till they had the place lookin' like the one they'd dreamed about. Wild roses in the river bend, white oak trees growin' on the knoll back o' the house, and mesquite brush that smelled like perfume after a rain. There was a red table cloth and flour sack curtains for the windows. The place was sure scary a-standin' out on the knoll at night with the lights shinin' through the windows.

"Then one day all hell turned loose. A band o' warrin' Apaches raided them. The leader of this band was a renegade Apache by the name o' Slow Elk. He had a moon eye and a scar on his forehead that brands him as sure as the Long Seven on them steers yonder. Most o' the Apaches lived peaceful enough on the reservations, but Slow Elk's band didn't take to the government ways or make powwow with the white man.

"They tied the man t' a tree and made him watch while they killed his wife. Then they scalped him and left him t' die.

"But he didn't die. He lived t' crawl t' the cabin and get a shovel, and blankets off the bed. He buried her out on a knoll where a white oak marks her grave. He started on the trail of that moon-eyed Injin—a long trail that's stretched across twenty years.

"Slow Elk took the name o' Nick Carter t' cover up he's a whole breed Injin. He lets out that Thunder Bird is his hideout. That gives the white renegades that work for him a chance t' bushwhack law officers that got their eye peeled for a white man.

"There's one thing Slow Elk don't know, Steve. He don't know that man he scalped is still livin' and been a-followin' his tracks for twenty years! That's why I didn't throw them steers over the Jim Stinson trail. I put 'em right down here in the wolf's pasture t' make it easy for him. There wasn't any other way t' get him, Steve. I'm a-askin' him t' make the cow steal, I'm bringin' him out where I want him...."

Steve sat for a long time without speaking. He reached across the table and gripped Scalpy's arm. It was one of those times when words were empty and silence spoke with a loud voice.

AT SUNDOWN the steers along the river were bedding down, their bellies filled with grass and water.

Under the chuck wagon Dutch Oven was sleeping off a quick drunk. He had bribed someone to bring him a quart. Dutch Oven had drunk down that forty-rod Border whisky like it was water. In the morning he'd be ringey as a wart hog, swinging a pot hook, cussing everything in sight.

Steve and Scalpy rode out and circled the bedded stock.

"You think this Injin plans to make the steal tonight, Scalpy?" Steve asked.

"Tonight she is. Slow Elk is got them steers sold across the Rio Grande right now. He ain't talkin' no chances on the herd gettin' past the Rim."

Hefty Summers, a little drunk, rode the outer edge of the herd. Steve and Scalpy swung their horses to meet him.

"Tell the boys they'll get a chance t' earn their wages tonight," Scalpy told Hefty. "Tell 'em t' braid their tails."

"Any o' them hombres gatherin' in the Border Saloon friends o' yours, Scalpy?" Hefty grinned.

"Yeah, friends. If you get a chance t' gut shoot 'em don't let that stop you."

"Think the Haden boys will side the outfit in a fight, Hefty?" Steve asked the trail boss.

"I'll bank on 'em," Hefty answered. "The Crusty one is all right. The one called Hank will do anything Crusty tells him."

The three men talked for a few minutes making plans to hold the herd against the stampede that would be the first move in Slow Elk's bag of tricks.

Hefty was cold sober when he swung his horse and headed for San Jose.

The flat adobe houses along the street were spotted with dim light. The Border Saloon was bright on the inside from a coal oil lamp that hung from the ridge log. An orange streak of light lay across the street from the open door. Horses stood at the hitchrack and the streets were fairly deserted.

Steve and Scalpy rode around to the rear of the saloon and hid their horses in a clump of willows. Steve moved toward the front of the building. He could make out three Long Seven horses tied to the rack, and across the street was Hefty's bay. He counted nine head of Carlton horses. The trail boss was spreading it out thin. There would be Hefty inside with three Long Seven punchers. Hefty was taking the odds on this side of the river in order to throw more men with the trail herd when the stampede started.

Scalpy moved up to where Steve was standing. His long legs were bowed out, thumbs hung from his gun belt.

"I'm goin' in and side Hefty," Scalpy said. "You take a plant where you can watch the door. Kill anything that looks like a Carlton."

Steve watched the Texan emerge from the shadow of the wall and then his long frame was picked up by the light. His figure filled the doorway; his shadow, elongated by the hanging lamp, reached the far sidewalk. For a moment the shadow was motionless, framed by the orange light. There was something weird and uncanny in that clean-cut reflection that brought a chill to Steve's spine. The shadow began to grow short, moved slowly across the lighted space. Steve's mind was stamped with a vivid picture of that haunted soul inside the Texan's hate-seared brain. The shadow shortened as the man walked down the floor of the saloon, eyes shuttling, hands close to his gun butts, his eyes sweeping the faces of the men inside, searching for the moon eye and the scarred forehead of the man he hated.

A GUN barked across the river followed by yells. Then came the sound of the stampeding herd. Clanking horns, pounding hoofs, and the sharp yap of the Long Seven punchers playing the milling herd for a circle run.

Steve lifted his six-shooter and shot into the air. It was the signal to the Long Seven men inside that the fight had started.

A man that Steve spotted as a Carlton ran out of the saloon. He saw Steve and jerked his six shooter. Steve chopped a shot into his middle and saw the man stumble into a backward-running fall. He sprawled and lay still.

The night was torn apart by gun fire, both inside and across the river. Glass crashed and the light in the saloon went out. Dance girls screamed as red streaks ripped the darkness. Steve knew the special bark of Scalpy's .44. He heard it speak twice, and then three times in rapid, split-second speed.

Horses lunged at the hitchrack, snapping their tie ropes and bucking empty saddles. Hefty Summers lifted a war whoop from his leather lungs. Steve caught the rasping cussing of Scalpy as he stumbled and fell off a hitching pole a spooked bronc was dragging by its hackamore rope. He saw the Texan get up and make a run for his horse.

In the same instant he saw an Indian leaning far over on his horse's neck, bare-back and hatless, his braided hair hanging down his front, digging his moccasined heels into the flanks of his lunging horse. The horse was spotted with a white hind leg, another splash of white stretched from his foreleg to his flank. That spot horse tagged Slow Elk as though he had called his name!

Scalpy was hacking at the saddle strings that held the hatchet with his pocket knife. He jerked it free and waved it as if it were a tomahawk.

Steve lowered the gun with which he had been covering Slow Elk. The big In-

jin was Scalpy's meat. He'd give Scalpy the pleasure of killing him.

Scalpy lifted his horse to a run that was a blurred streak as he followed the paint horse into the darkness.

A bullet ricocheted off Steve's skull and he was conscious of a mouthfull of dirt. He crawled on his hands and knees. His crawl carried him to the hitchrack. He pulled himself up by grasping the tie rail and looked for a hole in the enclosing blackness. The hole appeared and he saw Hefty riding through the door of the saloon. Yells came from the inside and the door spewed out four Carlton men who were gunning from the inside.

Steve felt the hard impact of a slug in the fleshy part of his leg. He emptied his gun into the pack that jammed the door. Two of them rolled to the dirt and lay still.

"Come and get it, your yellow sons," Steve called. Chili outlaws running into a string of tough luck . . ."

Steve's gun snapped on an empty shell.

That faint click was followed by a dense stillness. The remaining two of the Carlton crew stood in the door with their arms elevated. Covering them was Hefty and one of the Long Seven punchers. At the front of the saloon and across the dirt street lay grotesque, sprawled objects that were the bodies of dead men.

"These two are my prisoners, Hefty," Steve said. "Herd 'em out on the flat and have one of the boys hold 'em till daylight. They're headed for Box Elder and the jail house."

Blood was running into Steve's boot, and the left side of his face was a dark blotch. Then something riveted his attention.

"Gawdamighty, Hefty!"

Scalpy was staggering towards them on stilted steps. Steve hopped on his good leg to meet him.

In the Texan's right hand hung the blood-

(Continued on page 112)

To Sacramento or Hell!



The outlaw swung his shotgun
and bellowed, "Stop there! Pull
up, you!"

**Horseshoe Gulch welcomed
all miners who answered
the call of its rich diggings.
But God help a man like
Riley, who twice must dare
the mysterious renegade
deadline — both going and
coming!**

By
**De Witt
Newbury**

HE WAS stitching pockets on a wide
buckskin belt when Banjo Crowder
clumped into his shack. Riley
looked up scowling, because he didn't like
to be caught at that particular job.

Though, of course, Banjo, a lumpy fel-
low with a round, simple face, was harm-
less. "The Old Man's poorly," he said.
"Askin' you to come over."

Riley Kane scratched his sun-bleached whiskers. "All right," he said, "I'll go." After Crowder had slouched away, he hid the belt in his bunk. Then he ambled out, waded the creek in his bear-greased boots, and climbed to Barron's cabin.

Barron wasn't really old; he only seemed so to the younger men. And then he'd been the first to stake a placer claim in Horse-shoe Gulch. He had education and good sense and could settle arguments, mostly without using a gun.

Just now he was ailing. His pick had glanced from a rock and gashed his left foot, leather and all. The boys had fixed him up as well as possible and they had found a tame digger squaw to do his cooking. Yet he didn't seem to mend.

Riley found him sitting up with his bandaged foot resting on a cracker box. Generally he shaved smooth, but now his eagle-beaked face was all gray stubble.

"Howdy, Old Man," Riley greeted cheerfully. "How ye doin'?"

Barron bit off a groan. "Where's that Injun?"

Riley looked outside and saw the squaw, a runty, ugly creature. "Choppin' wood," he reported.

"Good, she's out of the way. Reach under the bunk and fetch out the jug."

Whiskey was scarce, so Riley only took one swallow, then filled a tin cup for Barron. "This'll tonic your gizzard," he said.

The Old Man swore. "That damn Digger! Yesterday she fried a mess of grasshoppers. When I wouldn't eat, she wanted to poultice my foot with 'em. There, hide the jug and listen to me."

Riley sat on the bunk. "Fire away."

A little color had come into Barron's thin cheeks. "I hear you're going to take a *paesear* outside. Pack your gold to the settlements."

It was Riley's turn to swear. "Devil in the pea-patch! How'd ye know that? I been keepin' it dark, so no hold-ups will be on the watch."

Barron moved impatiently. "Everybody knows it! You stretched that deer-hide on your shanty wall, then you cut pieces out. Anybody could see they were for a pouched belt."

"It's so," Riley admitted. "But I won't take my dust to any express station, nor ride in a stage coach. Stages get stopped, and express boxes get stole. No, sir! I'll go afoot, clear to the Wells Fargo bank in Sacramento, and keep my gun handy as I go."

The Old Man leaned back, sweat dampening his forehead. "You can do something for me. You see, Riley, I can't last much longer."

"You're foolin'!" Riley exclaimed in distress. "That little jab won't finish you!"

"It's given me blood poisoning. My leg has green streaks in it, and the pains run up to the hip. No, I'm done for, and there's only one thing I really want—to see my girl."

Riley stared, mouth open. "Your gal?"

"My daughter. I brought her out in a Boston packet, four years ago. Been meaning to have her here some time—there are decent married women in the gulch now. Well, I don't suppose she'll live here, but she can bury me and go back to her friends in town. She'll have my pile, that's one comfort."

"How old is the gal?" Riley asked huskily. "Where's she at?"

"Her name is Patricia Eulalia. She's nigh eighteen and in a boarding school for young ladies. I'll give you a letter—my gold, too, if you can carry so much. I'd like to know it's safe."

"I'll pack the dust," Riley promised, "and bank it with mine. But—but females ain't in my line."

Barron looked at him gravely. "You're the steadiest man in camp, the only man I trust. Bring my girl, and don't waste any time!"

Riley shook hands. "I'll do it, Old Man, if I bust a gut!"

Yet he was worried as he went back across the gulch. How would he make out with a young lady? He'd have to be polite as a buck angel, he thought, and he hardly knew how. . . .

Some of the boys were frolicking down by the creek. Crowder was plunking his banjo and Tanglefoot was jigging. Riley passed on. He didn't like those two.

A queer couple to be friends. Crowder was sulky except when whanging out music. Tanglefoot was different—skinny and limber and always making fool jokes with a grin on his freckled face. Neither liked work. They went off on hunting trips together but never brought back much game.

THE night was dark and quiet when Riley prowled down the gulch, the gold-filled belt heavy around his middle. Besides that he carried a sack of grub, a rolled blanket, and his cap-and-ball revolver. He also carried a letter buttoned safely in a shirt pocket.

There were lights in some of the cabins and tents where men were telling yarns or playing cards. He listened for Crowder's banjo but didn't hear it.

The thought of that stupid idiot was bothersome. He'd seen the belt almost finished, and might have told his loose-jawed partner. News got around in a queer way. The trails were full of bandits, and it was hard for a fellow to get his gold out.

Many a pilgrim had been stopped and cleaned or found stiff on the trail, with a hole in him.

However, nobody saw Riley leave camp. He met nobody on the path through the gulch or on the mountain track beyond. When daylight came he took to the timber and headed through trackless country. He pushed on until he was too tired to take another step.

He drank from a mountain stream, cooked grub over a small drywood fire, and bedded down, still wearing his heavy belt and big Colt revolver.

It was the same next day. He slogged through rough woods until sundown. The down-grade gave him direction, as did the sun, when he could see it. The gold grew heavier and heavier, but he couldn't rest because the Old Man was dying, back in camp, and wanted to see his girl—his Patricia Eulalia.

At any rate, Riley told himself, he had managed to sneak away. He had given the slip to any robbing rascal who might have hankered to bushwhack him.

But he was feeling satisfied too soon!

Towards evening he stopped, uncertain of his direction. He was well down in the foothills by now and the timber was thicker. The green boughs of spruce and pine trees shut out most of the light.

Seeing a big tree with lower branches within reach, he decided to climb it. If he could sight the setting sun, he could keep on for an hour or so.

There was no need to climb with all that gold weighing him down. Dropping his blanket, he pulled up his sweat-sodden shirt. It was a relief to shed the hot, chafing belt. He laid it beside the blanket, safe, he was sure, in the middle of a lonesome forest.

He was halfway up the tree when something—a sound, a movement—made him look down. He saw a hunched figure scuttle out of the brush, straight toward his tree.

Riley could hardly believe his eyes. No doubt about it, though; a thief was reaching for his belt of dust!

He whooped. Hanging to a limb with one hand, he hauled out his gun with the other.

The man below looked up. Riley saw eyes glaring from a brown face, teeth white in a dark mat of beard. A pistol banged, and a splinter of bark flew from the trunk beside him.

He straightened his arm and fired. The man bent backward and seemed to stiffen. Then he dropped like a log.

Riley couldn't watch the ground while he climbed down; he needed eyes as well as hands and feet. He came with a rush, sliding and swinging. Dropped from the lowest limb and bent over the dead man.

A small, spidery fellow with a crooked look about him. His hat had fallen off, showing a hole in his forehead. Riley had never seen him before.

"There's a good job, anyway," he grunted. "Wonder how he spotted me—by trail-in' or sheer damn accident? Funny business!"

He turned now to pick up his belt. It wasn't there.

For a minute Riley didn't understand, couldn't believe that it was really gone. He pawed around, shifted his blanket roll, then went and turned the body over. No use, the belt had vanished!

"Didn't walk off by itself," he concluded. "This galoot wasn't alone! His pardner lifted it while I was gettin' down."

He beat through the bushes and surrounding timber and searched the ground for footmarks, without success. He was no tracker, and the light was failing.

Finally he gave up in discouragement. His own loss was bad enough, but he had lost the Old Man's gold, too. He could make it good, after months of panning dirt, but it would be too late to do Barron any good!

And how could Riley keep his promise now? How could he fetch Patricia Eulalia

with no money and no dust? He'd have to pay stage fare, for night stops and decent food. A girl couldn't rough it like a man.

He'd promised to fetch her without wasting time. . . .

Suddenly his wandering eye fell on the dead man, and he saw a way—a possible way.

It was no time to be squeamish. He turned out the man's pockets. Five Mexican dollars were all he found, but he took the fellow's pistol too, a Remington in good shape. The belt held ammunition and caps, a cased bullet-mould.

"My loot, you robbin' devil," he addressed the body. "And now I'll leave ye for the coyotes and foxes."

TWO days later Riley was in Sacramento. He was tired. His boots were badly scuffed and his clothes were in poor condition. But he didn't attract any attention because the town was used to ragged, pistol-belted miners.

It was astonishing how the place had grown. There were new streets and buildings, full of new people—farmers, merchants, speculators, Chinamen, swells in stovepipe hats, even well-dressed ladies.

Barron's letter was addressed to "Belle Claire Manor." Riley had no notion what a manor was, but after search and inquiry he located it at the edge of town, a large frame house behind a high board fence.

It was not very old, yet already the

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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fence-boards had shrunk and the house had a warped, sun-dried look. Riley peered through a gap between two boards. He saw a garden with flowers and shrubs and benches set here and there.

He had a frightened feeling. *Dammit*, he thought, *I'd rather face two road agents with two guns apiece!*

Stiffening his backbone, he opened the high gate, marched up to the house door and hammered with a hard fist. Nothing happened. He pounded again.

As he stood waiting, a voice came from somewhere overhead. The girl's voice asked: "Who is he, do you suppose?"

"The King of the Cannibal Islands!" another voice answered. "Isn't he handsome?" There was a burst of giggling.

Riley looked up, and saw several heads—young female heads—disappear below a window sill. "Devil in the pea-patch!" he muttered, knowing the figure he must cut with his whiskers, guns and blanket.

He was still flustered when the door opened and a stiff-faced, stiff-skirted woman confronted him. She didn't invite him in, but he stepped forward, and she had to step back.

Standing in the bare hall, he held out the letter. "Howdy, Ma'am. I reckon you're the boss lady."

She took it and looked him up and down. "No gentlemen are allowed here," she said severely, "except fathers and guardians." It was obvious that she didn't like him.

"I'm here," Riley said, "because Old Man Barron is crippled up. I brung that letter for his gal—Patricia Eulalia."

"She shall have it."

"Well, there's more to it than that. I got to see her and make arrangements."

The woman shook her head. "Against the rules."

Riley lost patience. "Looky here, Ma'am! I come all the way from Horseshoe Gulch after the gal. Now are you goin' to trot her out, or will I have to tear the place apart?"

She gave him a startled glance, turned and rustled up the stairs.

He waited again, shifting uneasily, dropping his hat and picking it up. Suddenly he heard a swift patter of feet, and a girl came running down. She was a smallish girl with a mop of dark curls and big eyes in a glowing face.

She ran straight to him, the letter in one hand, the other stretched out. "You're Daddy's friend!" she said in the nicest voice he'd ever heard. "The one he thinks so much of!"

Riley's big fist swallowed her little hand. "Guess I think a heap of him, Miss Patricia Eulalia."

The girl made a face. "I'm just simply Pat." Then she shook the letter at him and danced a few steps. "So I'm to go to the mines. How wonderful and exciting!"

The stiff woman had followed more slowly and now she interrupted. "To the mines? With this man? No! Utterly out of the question!"

Riley turned to her, frowning. "It's in the letter. The Old Man wants her, 'cause he's crippled."

"Crippled?" Pat cried. "He didn't tell me that! Is it bad?"

He couldn't tell her the truth when she was happy. He shook his head. "Only lamed a bit."

Once more the stiff woman interrupted. "When Miss Barron goes to her father, it will be after due consideration and with a proper escort. Now go away, you ruffian, or I will bid all the young ladies open the windows and scream for help!"

Due consideration meant delay when there was no time to lose. Suddenly uncertain, Riley turned to Pat and saw that she had closed one bright eye. She was winking—actually winking—the eye farthest from the woman.

She was soundlessly forming words with her lips, too, while she pointed stealthily with one finger. "Wait. Outside the fence."

Except for that message, he was licked. A lot of females yelling murder! "I give in, Ma'am," he said, and slunk away in what seemed a cowardly retreat.

He didn't go far but rounded the fence and halted in an alley. The tall boards hid him from the house.

An hour passed without sign or signal. He was beginning to worry when a small, wiggling hand poked through a crack in the fence. It withdrew, he put an eye to the crack; and looked into another eye, bright and brown, with long black lashes.

"I'm behind a bush," Pat whispered. "They can't see me. How will we get to the mines?"

"Take the stage to Marysville," Riley explained, "then ride a freight wagon to Hunnicker's Station. There we hire a burro for you—I walk."

"It'll be fun!" she breathed. "When does the stage leave?"

"In the morning, at seven."

"I'll slip out," Pat planned, "before anybody else is awake. The gate will be locked, but I'll pile one bench on another and climb the fence. You be here, certain sure!"

"Bet your life!" Riley promised.

THE day was wearing on, and he still had to raise some money.

He hurried back to town. Walking the streets until he spotted a hardware store, he strode in and unbuckled the captured Remington.

"How much," he demanded, "for the outfit, belt and all?"

The storekeeper, a chin-whiskered Yankee, haggled a bit. Guns were in demand, though, and this was a good one. Riley swaggered out with fifty dollars in his pocket, thirty in United States eagles, twenty in California slugs.

"Enough to see us through, just about," he gloated. "So now I'll risk my Mex silver, 'cause a little more won't hurt."

The saloon he chose was gaudily fitted

up. Bar, fixtures, glassware and furniture, had all been shipped out from the East. So had the liquor and gambling gear.

Riley couldn't afford to drink. He turned his back on the long bar, passed the poker tables and faro layout; his humble stakes weren't good enough for them. At one side he found the paddlewheel and elbowed to a place amongst the crowd.

"Chose your numbers, gents," the operator was chanting, "while the wheel spins! She spins a fortune for some lucky cuss!"

The thing was crooked, of course. Riley was counting on that, having learned from experience. It would pass the numbers with the high stakes but it had to stop somewhere.

He dropped two Mexican dollars on the only empty square. The gambler grunted in scorn, the wheel spun and, sure enough, he won.

The way to beat this game was to put the lowest stakes on the board. When he finally backed away from the wheel, he had his five Mexican bits and a fistful of big American dollars.

He could buy a drink now. Pushing to the bar, he slapped down a dollar. With the whisky burning comfortably in his empty stomach, he looked over the crowded room.

His wandering glance became fixed in a stare of surprise. Three men were sitting at a nearby table, heads close together as they talked. And the queer thing was that Riley knew two of them and couldn't imagine how or why they had come there. Banjo Crowder and Tanglefoot!

He recognized them, though both had an unfamiliar look—a look he'd never seen before. Tanglefoot wasn't grinning, but eager and intent. Banjo's fat face wasn't silly now; it was knowing enough.

The third man was big and tough, with high cheekbones and a down-sweeping mustache.

"Hi, boys!" Riley hailed. "What you at, so far from Horseshoe?"

They glanced around, without seeming to see him. Then all got to their feet. Tanglefoot had his grin back, and Banjo wore his old foolish look. The thick-bodied fellow looked thicker than ever.

He bulged in the middle. *As if a stuffed belt were under his clothes.* A sudden suspicion shot through Riley's mind. "Hold on a minute!" he shouted.

But they had pushed through the door, and an incoming group got in his way. When he reached the street they were nowhere in sight.

"Gave me the slip!" he muttered. "Why'd they act so, unless—?"

It seemed impossible. That no-account pair! Then he remembered their frequent hunting trips. "Might be they're in cahoots with the hold-ups, huntin' two-legged game!"

He'd tackle the problem later, he decided. Couldn't go chasing after them now; he had a more important job on hand. . . .

A few things came first, of course. He bought a new red flannel shirt, had his hair and whiskers trimmed by a Mexican barber. He ate at a Mexican cook-house and paid a dollar to sleep in a barn-like bunk-house.

Next morning, just as dawn was brightening, Riley stood in the alley again, outside the school fence. He waited, listened and looked until he heard a scraping and bumping. Then a bonneted head rose into sight.

"Here I am!" Pat whispered, and a carpet bag thumped to the ground beside him. "Catch me!"

Now she was perching like a bird on the fence-top. Next moment she flew down with a flutter of petticoats and he had her in his arms, slender and soft.

"You're so strong!" she panted as he stood her on her feet. "And you *are* handsome! My stars and garters! I'd never have known you, all barbered up!"

"Me?" Riley protested. "By glory,

you're the handsome one! Smell sweet, too. But we better not stand here swappin' compliments." He caught up the bag and started off, Pat skipping beside him.

"Is it a long stage ride?" she asked.

"All day. Safe, though. The up stages ain't held up 'cause it's the down stages that carry gold."

"Oh, I'd love to get held up! So exciting!"

"You wouldn't, not after you'd tried it. Reckon nobody'd shoot a lady, at that."

"But you have a pistol and you could shoot the robbers."

"Sure 'nough!"

They ate breakfast at the Mexican restaurant. The peppery food made Pat's eyes water, but she swallowed it bravely and drank the black coffee. "We only have tea at the school," she said.

The sun was up when they reached the stage station. They were just in time, as the mules were already being harnessed to the coach. A group of passengers, important looking gentlemen in broadcloth coats and stovepipe hats, stood waiting.

Riley was surprised to see them. He was surprised, too, when a shotgun guard climbed to his seat and an iron-bound box was passed up. He turned to a station hand and asked, "Are they takin' gold up north?"

The man shook his head. "Cash money. Nobody's supposed to know, but everybody does. They're startin' a branch bank in Marysville, and them there are the funds."

"Come on, gal!" He dragged Pat into the office and pawed money from a pocket. "Two fares to Marysville," he said.

The agent, a brash youngster, stroked a downy mustache. "Sorry, we're full up. You'll have to take the next coach."

"Can't wait!" Riley declared. He had a vision of the school-ma'am and a dozen girls coming after him, all screaming. "This young lady's plumb got to go, 'cause her daddy's waitin'!"

"Well," the agent relented, "I guess we

could squeeze her in. Put her baggage on top. But not you."

"I got to go, too," Riley insisted, "to take care of her!"

"Then hire a horse," the agent suggested. "Better put the lady aboard, it's starting time."

No help for it. They hurried out to the coach. The gentlemen took off their hats politely, bowing Pat to the best seat by the right rear window. She clung to Riley for a moment.

"Don't fret," he comforted. "I'll be right along."

The whiskered, gauntleted driver mounted to his place, gathered up the reins and cracked his long whip. The coach rolled away.

IT LEFT Riley with an uncertain, desperate feeling. He turned and demanded, "How 'bout that hoss?"

The agent was at his elbow. "All right, we'll fix you up."

A hostler led an animal from the stable. Only it wasn't a horse, but a gaunted mule with a hammer head and a bad eye. The bridle had been broken and knotted together, and the saddle was a ruin.

Riley stood speechless. The agent waved a hand. "The only spare critter we've got. He'll get you there, if you can ride."

"I can ride," Riley growled. "How much?"

"Thirty dollars."

"Thirty damn-it-to-hells!" Riley exploded. "I could buy the crow-bait for that!"

The young fellow grinned. "Why, friend, that's just what you're doing. He's no use to us but he's yours for thirty dollars, saddle and bridle thrown in."

Riley paid the price, and it cleaned him. Now he couldn't pay for the overnight stop in Marysville, for meals, or for the freight wagon. He could only follow Pat and trust to luck.

He swung up on the mule, dug in his

heels. The brute laid back its long ears and started off at a good clip, seeming better than it looked.

After a mile of fast riding he overtook the stage. Pat was leaning out of the window, bonnet off and dark curls ruffled by the wind. She waved a hand, and he ranged alongside.

"I hain't lost ye," he said.

She gave him a confiding smile. "I knew you'd come!"

The coach rolled on and Riley kept pace. They slowed to a walk on the up-grades, trotted and galloped on the level. Sometimes he fell back out of the dust, sometimes he rode close.

He began to feel easier. It looked as if things were straightening out, he thought. He could sell the mule in Marysville for twenty or thirty dollars, and everything would be all right.

Just then everything went all wrong!

They were on a crooked stretch of road, winding between timbered hills, when the mule balked. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, it planted all four feet and stood like a rock.

Riley nearly pitched over the hammer head. He pushed himself back into the saddle, swearing, and kicked with both heels. The mule laid back its ears and switched its tail, but made no other move.

The stage was out of sight already. Riley yelled, cursed and kicked, without effect. He pulled his pistol and whacked the bony rump with the long barrel. Still no result.

And now he heard the pounding of hoofs. He turned in the saddle; and saw two men come galloping around the curve behind him.

They rode past him before they could check, then reined in and wheeled. Both wore flat-crowned hats and short coats and were hard-looking customers, one with bristly side-whiskers, the other with mustache and goatee.

The first said, "He's the galoot! Light-colored beard and red shirt, ridin' a jack."

The other said, "Drop that gun, *hombre!* You're arrested."

Riley didn't drop his revolver. He gaped, then he yelled, "Arrested, hell! What for? And who are you?"

The nearest man flicked his coat open to show a silver star. "We're sheriff's deputies. You're wanted for stealin' a young gal." Both men had pulled their guns.

Somebody had to be sensible, so Riley swallowed his rage. "Looky here, gents! I didn't steal no gal. She come with me of her own free will, 'cause her daddy sent me after her—with a letter to prove it."

The first deputy scowled. "Don't matter! We was sent to bring you in."

"I won't come!" Riley shouted. "If you want a fight, start it!"

The second deputy scratched his jaw with his pistol barrel. "Where's this here letter?" he asked. "And where's the gal?"

"She's got the letter and she's in the stage up ahead."

The two looked at each other doubtfully. "Might as well lope along," the whiskered one allowed, "and see what's what." He waved his pistol. "Come on, ride!"

Riley gave them a painful grin. "Can't. This rack o' bones has turned mean. If you can move him, you're smarter'n me."

The whiskered deputy dismounted. He carried a rawhide quirt, looped on his wrist, and he stepped forward and struck a slashing blow at the mule's inner forelegs.

The mule bolted, leaped into a dead run and left the deputies staring, flabbergasted.

In a flash they were left far behind. Riley had never ridden so fast in all his life. He clung on, hat gone, blanket rolling, bouncing on his back, gun still gripped in his right fist. "Hi-yi-ee!" he whooped. "Show 'em your tail, race-hoss!"

He rounded a turn, covered a straight stretch, veered around another curve—and saw the stage. It was standing still in the middle of the road.

Riley didn't have long to look, but his eye took in the picture. Driver and guard

on top, both with hands in the air. A tall, masked man, afoot, threatening them with a double shotgun. The express box lying in the road where it had been thrown. And two more masked bandits—one heavy-set, the other lanky—bending to lift it.

He saw them all turn, startled as he tore down on them. The two jumped away from the box. The other swung his shotgun and bellowed, "Stop there! Pull up, you!"

There was no stopping. The mule swerved away from the coach and charged straight at the tall bandit. The shotgun blasted with both barrels, and Riley felt his mount go down in mid-stride.

He rolled off backwards as it fell, clearing the smashing body and flailing hoofs. Shaken and bruised, he found himself crouching against a coach wheel. The wheel turned as the stage team danced, and he pushed away.

At first he couldn't see the tall fellow. Then he saw half of him, lying flat. The other half was under the mule.

But his partners were still up! A pistol banged, a bullet nicked a wheel-spoke and snarled under the coach. The lean one was shooting.

Riley could play that game, too. He'd hung onto his gun in spite of everything. He thumbed up the hammer and let go.

The thin robber fell forward, across the express box.

That left the thick one. But where was he? Skeddaddling! Diving into the roadside brush and heading for the timber!

There was something familiar about his broad back, and he bulged at the waist. Riley followed, limping until he had shaken himself together.

He went up the hillside, scrambling and panting, trying to see ahead through the trees. The brush was thick here, though it thinned into pine woods farther up. He paused to listen and heard no footsteps, no rustling leaves or cracking branches.

Then he caught a glimpse of the man. He was up above on the hillside, moving

with surprising stealth for such a heavy sort. But something seemed to weigh him down and slow him.

Riley climbed a few more yards. "Give up, Banjo!" he shouted, "I've got you lined!"

The thick fellow didn't give up. Spinning around with gun ready, he sent three shots whistling down the hill.

By that time Riley was behind a tree. Lead cracked into the trunk. He stuck head and gun-hand out, took a quick sight and fired.

Banjo slowly sat down on the pine-needled slope.

After a minute Riley stepped out cautiously, aiming again. But he lowered his gun when Banjo called down, "Don't give me no more! I've had enough."

Riley climbed up to him. "Reckon you and Tanglefoot were smarter than you made out," he said. "Not smart enough, though."

The thick man was leaning back now, against the slope. "Game's played out," he muttered, and his eyes closed. "You're a square galoot, Riley. You can have my banjo."

"Thanks," Riley said. "I want more than that."

When he came down the hill, a little later, there was a bulge under his red shirt.

A CROWD was standing by the coach. Driver, guard and passengers were afoot in the road, and the two deputies had come up and dismounted. They were covering the tall bandit.

The other bandit—Tanglefoot, sure enough—was finished. So was the mule.

Riley looked for Pat, and didn't have to look far. She ran over and clutched his arm. "I wasn't scared a bit," she said, "until you came and fell down, and the guns began to shoot."

"Didn't need to be," he told her, and turned to the deputies. "Here's the young lady. She's got that letter in her bag."

The whiskered deputy grinned. "Never mind, we got our hands full. Say, this hombre is Sonora Sam! There's a reward on him—if you want to claim it."

Riley shook his head. "You can have it."

"So? Well, in that case we'll take him in, 'stead of you."

"Suits me," Riley beamed. "But looky, I've lost my mule. How'll I get to Marysville?"

Here the driver spoke up. "You'll ride on the seat 'twixt me and Hank. . . ."

The miners had knocked off work, were washing at the creek, cooking at outdoor fires, and lounging by their shanty doors.

Riley called to one. "How's Old Man Barron?"

"He's still breathin'!" The answer reassured Riley; at least they were in time.

But Pat had sensed that something was wrong. "Where is Dad?" she demanded, suddenly anxious. "What's the matter?"

Riley didn't answer. He hurried on, rounded a rocky shoulder, and saw Old Barron, sitting on his long doorstep, large as life! The Digger squaw squatted near him, grinning hideously.

Pat slid from the burro and scampered into his arms. Riley approached more slowly. "Devil in the pea-patch, Old Man!" he said. "Reckon you did fool me!"

Barron chuckled. "'Twas this damned—this blessed Injun. When I wouldn't have a grasshopper poultice, she boiled up a mess of roots and leaves. It drew the poison out, blessed if it didn't!"

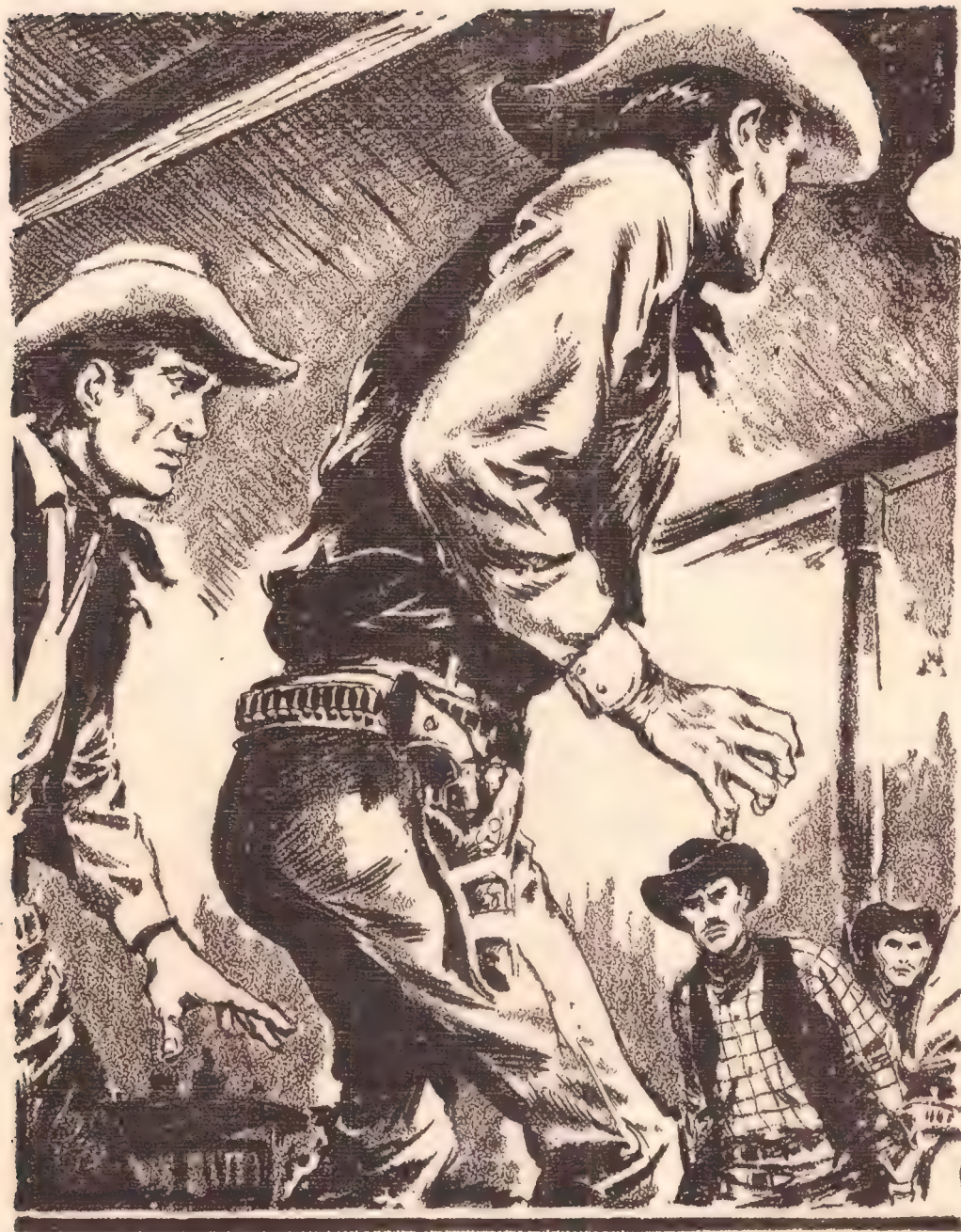
Riley sighed in relief. "Couldn't bank the gold," he said, "so I brung it back. Had a little trouble with hold-ups."

"Don't you believe him!" Pat said. "They had the trouble."

The Old Man hugged his daughter. "He did well enough for a fellow who's shy of females."

Pat spoke again. "He says I'm handsome and smell sweet. That's a good beginning!"

Riley wondered what she meant. He aimed to find out. ■ ■ ■



★ It's easier to tackle an enraged grizzly with a buggy
whip, or stop a stampede with a kind word—than to ★
gentle that human hand-gun hurricane, Jim Yates!

THE NAME AND THE GAME



"You can't prove anything against me," he said narrowly.

JIM YATES whirled on the porch for another look at the tight-lipped cowboys clustered around the horse in front of the bunkhouse. They had said not a word to him, maintaining the grim silence that had been eating into him like screw worms for weeks, but the accusation in their stony stares was clear enough. They blamed him for this, and he was too proud to tell them it was not his fault.

With a gesture of cold fury, he flipped his cigarette away and turned into the Lazy Y ranch house, slamming the door viciously behind him.

"Who is it?" came his Uncle Bill's quick call from the office.

Jim didn't answer as he turned, his spurs trailing an angry jangle behind him. He pulled up in the doorway of the cluttered little room, a big man whose battered hat rode far forward on his dark head, whose gray eyes were rock-hard in his sun-browned face.

Old Bill Yates glanced up from the tally book opened before him on the desk. He was a scrawny old-timer, his hair sparse and gray, his keen blue eyes set deep in sixty years' collection of wrinkles. For a moment he stared at Jim while his expression of pained concentration gave way to look of careful inquiry. Then he laid his pencil down and slowly leaned back in his chair. "What's up now?" he asked.

"They just brought Harvey Towne in," Jim said, "across his saddle."

Punch-Packed Novelette of the Range

By A. C. Abbott

"Dead." It wasn't a question; it was a flat statement, without expression.

"Dead enough to skin!" Jim reached into the pocket of his faded shirt for tobacco, swirling a cigarette into shape while his eyes flicked angrily over Bill's unreadable face. He waited for his uncle to offer some comment, some expression of regret or anger, but the old man kept his narrowed gaze riveted on the desk in front of him and said nothing.

Jim dragged in a deep breath and held it until his chest ached. "That's the third boy we've lost in a month," he said then, deliberately. "I think it's high time we did somethin' about it."

"The law will take care of it," Bill said, as he had been saying right along, ever since Jim had arrived.

"The law!" Jim choked. "That damn fat law won't even come out here to look for tracks, and you know it. Good Lord, Bill! Somebody's brandin' our calves faster'n the cows can have 'em. We're losin' cowboys faster'n we can hire 'em. How in hell can you sit there—"

Jim broke off to light a match by flicking it on his thumb nail with sharp violence, aware that the old cowman was eyeing him with a steady, squint-eyed scrutiny. Let him look, damn him! If he hadn't hobbled Jim when this trouble first started, maybe it could have been stopped. Maybe the life of fun-loving, likable Harvey Towne could have been saved.

"Hang onto yourself, son," Bill advised quietly. "You've been doin' fine these last two months. You haven't been in a fight since you came to this country, and I've been proud of you Jim."

"I'm glad somebody has," Jim said shortly. "I shore haven't . . ."

Again he broke off, striding to the fly-specked window to glance at the bunkhouse. The boys had carried the tarp-covered figure inside and were now clustered around the door, smoking and gesticulating angrily. The long fingers of Jim's right hand slowly

tightened into a fist near the bone handle of his heavy gun. They didn't know, those boys. Didn't know how it galled to hold his elbows in close when every bone in his hard, young body was yelling for him to trail a man down and kill him!

"You've been playin' it just like I want you to," Bill went on with quiet satisfaction. "I was afraid, when I first decided to leave the ranch to you and sent for you, that you wouldn't be able to settle down and take hold. You've been driftin' for a long time, and you've got a reputation for hellin' that'd give a man the shivers. But you been doin' just fine."

Jim clenched his teeth against his bitter retort. Sure, he'd been doing fine. He had dutifully reported evidence of rustling and murders to a sheriff's office that did nothing about it. He had ignored the doubtful glances cast his way, the curious whisperings that followed him wherever he went. He'd even backed down from big, swaggering Chad Newman.

"I've heard," Bill said, as if reading his thoughts, "that Chad Newman has been crowdin' you pretty hard, but you've been puttin' him off, all right."

"That's all it amounts to," Jim said coldly. "Puttin' him off. I'll have to take him on sooner or later."

"You can't afford to, Jim. That CN outfit is too damn powerful. It was old Charley Newman's money that put Fat Downey in as sheriff. You get to monkeyin' with Chad, and they'll put you in the pen or on the end of a rope so fast you won't even have time to kick."

"Makes a difference who does the killin', does it?" Jim asked acidly.

"A heap of difference. You lay off of Chad, young feller, and keep away from Cindy Grover. She's Chad's girl."

Jim whirled away from the window, all the old wildness flooding through him, lighting his eyes and making him coolly sure of himself. "Not any more, she isn't. She quit him right after I came here."

"That's what I'm talkin' about. They were practically engaged before you came, and Chad won't take a jiltin'."

"Chad can go to hell," Jim said softly, "and so can you. I'll lay off on him as long as I can. I'll try to keep out of trouble and I'll try to learn the cow business so I can run this ranch the way you want it."

"You're no stranger to cows," Bill cut in mildly. "You been on plenty drives, only you was too busy usin' a gun to do much work with a rope."

Jim ignored the interruption. "But I won't stay away from Cindy Grover unless she tells me to."

Bill's eyes squinted almost shut as he surveyed his nephew, but a crooked grin finally spread his grizzled face. "Gonna bust down the corral if I try to keep you away from that sorrel-maned filly, huh? Well, all right, Jim. I ain't tryin' to make a house pet out of you, only I do want you to be careful. I'm gettin' used to havin' you around, cowboy. Now tell me about Harvey."

Jim pulled in a deep breath, lowering his glance to the glowing end of his cigarette. Old Bill Yates couldn't be blamed if he had come to lean heavily on law and order. He had seen Jim's dad killed, trying to do the law's work. Bill himself had been partially crippled the same way. Now he desperately wanted young Jim to leave trouble to those paid to handle it.

"They found him over on Fall Creek," Jim said without inflection. "He was inchin' up on a brandin' fire when he got it—in the back."

"Too bad," Bill murmured. "He was a good boy, but cowpunchin' was never safe or easy." He hesitated. "What are your plans now, Jim?"

When Jim lifted his head to meet the old man's gaze, he knew again that he couldn't disappoint him. "I'll go out and look around, see if I can pick up anything. Then I'll report it to the sheriff."

"Good boy!" Bill pulled himself out of

his chair, hobbling around, the desk on stiff, bowed legs, his face crinkling in a warm smile. "You'll find it's best, Jim. You can't run a solid cow outfit if you're gonna go on the warpath at the drop of a hat."

"Maybe not." Jim pinched out his cigarette and held the butt cupped in his hand. "You can't always hold a ranch together on nothin' but cow savvy, either. We'll see how it works out, Bill. I'll do my damndest."

OUTSIDE on the porch Jim paused to roll and light another cigarette, his thoughts in a bog, his eyes moodily worried. One idea kept coming back, although it didn't make sense. The Lazy Y had been peaceful enough when he first came. The mavericking that had already cost the lives of three men had started just a month after Jim had taken over the job of foreman. He couldn't help feeling that his coming had started it, but why? Because he had demonstrated that he didn't want to fight? Jim didn't think that was it, but his harried mind couldn't find any other plausible explanation.

The rustling itself was enough to make a man swear. There was nothing concrete, no proof of any kind. Branding fires in out of the way places where the Lazy Y crew had not been working. Cows who had obviously lost their calves. Sometimes, apparently, the calves were run off. Other times they were obviously turned loose, but never once had the boys come across a calf freshly branded.

With no more than this to go on, Jim had doubted that rustling was actually being done—until the first cowboy had been found shot near one of those damning fires. According to the signs, that boy and the second had ridden right up to the fire and had been shot out of their saddles before they could draw a gun, proving that the rustler was someone they knew and did not suspect. But who?

As Jim headed for the corral, he noted

that the five cowboys were already there, saddling up. Jim's big hands instinctively balled into fists. Those cowboys had exasperated him almost beyond endurance ever since he had come here, and now he knew they were going to be hard to hold. They were good boys, but they were not the type to take trouble lying down. They seemed to feel that it was Jim's intention to do just that.

He ignored them as he stepped into the corral and dropped his loop on a big bay. They were standing around, waiting, as he threw his saddle into place and cinched it. He was aware that Curly Potter had leaned one husky shoulder against a post and had tipped his hat far down over his narrowed blue eyes. It was a clear-cut storm warning, and Jim took an extra hold on the temper he had so recently controlled.

"What are we gonna do?" the cowboy inquired in an edged drawl. "Ride out and watch the sunset?"

"I'm gonna cut for sign," Jim said evenly. "If you'd rather watch the sunset, hop right to it."

"And sposin' we find something?"

"If we find anything the sheriff can use, we'll damn quick tell him."

Curly jerked himself up to his full height, giving his hat a belligerent yank. "That's all, huh? Just tattle to the sheriff. Hell!"

"You brought Harvey in." Jim whirled to face the men, his voice rising coldly. "Did you look around out there? Did you find anything?"

"There's plenty tracks around that branding fire," Curly said evenly, "same as there's been before. Those tracks go somewhere, and the feller that made 'em is bound to be in 'em at the other end."

"Trailin' him down is a job for the sheriff." Jim noted that all five men had rifles shoved into saddle boots. The thrill of pride he felt for the men who comprised "his" outfit was bitterly strangled by the knowledge that they had no use for him. "I reckon I savvy how you boys feel, but

as long as you're ridin' for the Lazy Y, you'll let the law do the exterminatin'."

Without giving them further chance to argue, Jim swung into his saddle and turned toward Fall Creek. The range was rolling, dotted with cedar and oak, broken occasionally by sharp canyons in which water could usually be found. It was the kind of range that every drifter pictures in his lonely campfires, and it would one day be Jim's—if he could throttle the reckless drive for violent action that had so far governed his life.

The branding fire had been built in a small clearing in the brush, a hundred feet from the turbulent creek. On reaching the scene, the six men scattered, each to do his own investigating but each being very careful to stay out of the tracks he found. Jim had no trouble finding the spot where Harvey had been shot. The young cowboy had evidently spotted the smoke and had made a cautious advance to the edge of the clearing. Cautious but not cautious enough. He had just reached it when he was felled by a bullet in the back. Harvey Towne had probably not even found out who the rustler was.

Jim found, too, the spot where the killer had stood. A big man, judging by the boot tracks. An empty .45 cartridge lay nearby. That man, whoever he was, had returned to the fire to turn the calf loose, then had mounted his horse and ridden out toward the east. That much tallied with the meager evidence found in previous cases, but on this day the killer had made what Jim fervently hoped was a mistake. He had ridden a horse with an odd-shaped track.

Jim stared long at the track of that horse, knowing he would recognize it if and when he saw it again. The front feet were almost perfectly round, but the back feet were blunted, worn down. Scuffings in the dust proved that the horse dragged his hind feet when he walked or trotted.

Cattle tracks in the area were thick, making it impossible to trail the calf. By the

time Jim had finished his investigation, the five cowboys were sitting their horses at the edge of the clearing, waiting. He avoided their hostile stares as he rode up to them and reached for tobacco.

"You boys scatter out," he ordered gruffly. "See if you can find a weaner or a dogie with a fresh brand on him."

"What about them horse tracks?" Curly asked bluntly, jerking his head toward the east.

Jim kept his eyes on the cigarette he was rolling while he gave an answer that didn't even satisfy himself. "We might be able to follow those tracks to the man who made 'em," he said slowly. "If we did, there'd be a killin'—outside the law. And we'd be off Lazy Y range within two miles in that direction. I'll tell the sheriff about those tracks."

Curly spat vehemently. "So we spend our time lookin' for one damn calf while Harvey lays back there with a hole in him. I don't know about the rest of you fellers, but I liked that boy."

"So did I." Jim looked up squarely into Curly's cold, challenging stare. The young cowboy's usually sunny blue eyes were stormy with anger—and disgust. Jim felt a hot flush crowd into his face as he read that look for what it meant.

"Yeah." Again Curly spat. "If you ask me, you like Jim Yates a whole hell of a lot better."

"Think what you like, cowboy," Jim said softly, "but do as I tell you or get off the payroll."

Curly swept a slow critical glance around at his bunkmates, evidently looking for a moral support that was not lacking. "Reckon we'll stay on the payroll, Mr. Yates," he drawled then, "at least until we settle a few scores."

"The quickest way to settle 'em," Jim said evenly, "is to find that calf and find out what brand is on him. It sometimes helps to know who you're fightin' before you put on your war paint."

Without waiting for further reply, Jim wheeled his horse and spurred him into the brush, heading down the creek toward town. Once out of sight of the Lazy Y cowboys, Jim pulled the lunging horse to a walk and let go a stream of vicious curses that left him panting. It was the first time in his life that anyone had implied he was yellow without having to eat the words, teeth, fist and all.

"I s'pose," he told his horse acidly, "that dear old Uncle Bill would be awful proud of me for that."

He didn't blame Curly since he knew altogether too well that, in the young cowboy's boots, he'd be feeling exactly the same way; but it galled just the same. Jim realized that he was going to have to find something for law and order to work on and find it fast or he was going to blow his top all over the attractive landscape. And he had nothing as yet except an odd-shaped horse track and a hunch that this rustler was hitting not at the Lazy Y but at Jim Yates.

CHAPTER TWO

Three Mistakes

JIM followed the creek for only a short distance before coming out on a smooth ridge to the east. Far down below him, in the hollow of a small valley, he could see the cluster of gray frame buildings that marked the town of Fall Creek. The afternoon sun beat down relentlessly on the quiet range. No breeze stirred; no dust lifted anywhere within his range of vision to tell him of a moving horseman.

He quartered across the ridge, his eyes shifting constantly from the tree-studded range before him to the ground beneath him. If he could cut that odd shaped horse track again, he might be able to get a line on the killer without breaking his promise to old Bill. He dropped into a brushy draw, climbed the next ridge to the east, still with-

out any sign of the track. With a muffled curse he turned the horse down the ridge and headed directly for town.

This ridge sloped down gradually to the junction of two dry washes where the brush was thick. As Jim tipped off the last, steeper slant toward the wash, his horse stumbled hard. At the same time a shocking blow struck his side, spinning him around and forcing him into a wild grab for the saddle horn. He didn't make connections. His horse spooked violently, whirling out from under him as the sharp crack of a rifle sounded from the brush below.

Jim hit the steep slope like a runaway wagon, and he didn't stop rolling until he slammed into a collection of willows at the bottom. Dazed and fighting for breath, he made no immediate move to get up. Only when he heard the hard pound of a running horse did he struggle to a sitting position to inspect the damage.

The bullet, he found, had struck wide on the left side of his chest, had glanced off a rib and had ploughed a short furrow through muscle before taking off for parts unknown. It was not a crippling wound, although it was bleeding badly. Jim yanked his shirt off and tore it into strips, fashioning a pad and then a long bandage which he tied tight enough to stop the bleeding.

His horse had stopped half way down the slope and now stood prick-eared, eyeing him doubtfully.

"Young feller," Jim told him soberly, "I never liked a stumbling horse—until now. What kinda grain do you prefer?"

Jim found, as he stood up, that he was a little shaky but otherwise all right. He made it to the horse, got his denim jumper from behind the saddle and put it on, buttoning it securely over the bandage.

"No use advertisin'," he told the horse mildly. "Somebody's apt to be damn s'prised when I show up. I shore went down that slope like I was on my way to hell."

As he rode on into the brush, Jim knew what he hoped to find and he was not disap-

pointed. The same odd-shaped track came into the wash from an easterly direction and headed out at a run in the general direction of town.

"He circled around and was headin' for town," Jim mused aloud, "and I didn't change his plans none. Little horse, that's two mistakes he's made. Ridin' a horse you can track and leavin' a dead man behind who's able to do the trackin'."

Jim was mistaken about that, however. He had followed the track only a mile when he lost it on hard, rocky ground. Try as he would he could not pick it up again, and reluctantly he gave up the search. His side was throbbing with a steadily increasing pressure, and Jim had to admit that the wise thing was to hunt up a doctor. . . . And make his report to the sheriff.

The doctor's house, with his office occupying the front room, was set in a clump of trees at the edge of town, and Jim stopped there first. He was glad to find that he was the only customer.

"What happened to you?" the doctor asked as he examined the wound.

"Got in front of a bullet," Jim replied laconically.

"That's obvious," the little man snorted, "But who was holdin' the gun?"

"Don't know—yet."

The doctor paused, to peer over his spectacles with narrowed eyes. "Another one of those, huh? What's the sheriff doing about it?"

"I reckon," Jim drawled dryly, "that he's sittin' down in his office waitin' for the clues to walk in and identify themselves. Leastwise he's never come out to the ranch to look for any."

"Downey isn't malicious," the doctor said quietly. "He's just dumb. And, I'm afraid, he waits for orders before making a move of any kind. I believe in relying on the law when there is law, but in a case of this kind—"

"Yeah," Jim agreed. "My sentiments exactly."

"I should think," the doctor said mildly, "that you Lazy Y boys would start looking for targets instead of merely presenting them."

Jim shot him a resentful glance that prompted the little man of medicine to finish the stitching and dressing in a hurry. Jim shrugged back into his jacket, cursing silently and futilely. He couldn't blame people for what they were thinking. His Uncle Bill seldom got into town to express his views, and neighbors were mostly too busy to call at the ranch. Consequently, people knew only what they could see—that the new foreman of the Lazy Y was doing nothing except trotting in to see the sheriff periodically with a tale of woe.

Jim was muttering grimly to himself as he swung back on his horse and headed toward the sheriff's office. His one grain of comfort was that he was not the only one to realize the terrible inadequacy of the local law.

FALL CREEK was not much of a town, but it served the surrounding country well enough. The wide dusty street, practically deserted on this mid-week day, sprawled between tired looking business houses. The sheriff's office and jail were at the far end of the street, across from the feed store and livery corral.

As Jim rode past the first saloon, he noted a sweat-streaked roan standing hip shot at the tie rail. And he noted, almost instantly, that the horse's hind feet were worn short from constant dragging. With quickening pulse Jim wheeled up on the left side of the animal to inspect the brand. He knew a twinge of disappointment as he made out the CN on the horse's hip. Must be the wrong horse, since there was no reason he could think of why the powerful CN would be mavericking calves. Unless—

Jim stepped to the ground and gave the horse a sudden slap in the belly that made him shift quickly sideways. For a moment the animal fidgeted nervously, and Jim

eyed the tracks he was making with growing eagerness. His doubts vanished. This was the horse that had been at the branding fire and again in the dry wash.

Jim was grinning tightly as he pulled his hat down hard and readjusted his gunbelt. He would still make his report to the sheriff, but he would find out first who had been riding that horse. With deceptive casualness he stepped up to the board walk and shoved into the barroom.

For a moment he hesitated, blinking the strong sunlight out of his eyes. Then he sauntered toward the bar, thrilling to the fact that there were only three customers in the place. Two of them were townsmen who seldom rode. The third was Chad Newman. He was grinning provocatively as Jim came up to lean beside him at the bar.

"Howdy, Mr. Yates," he drawled. "Where you been?"

"One of the boys left the corral gate open this mornin'," Jim replied easily. "I wandered out in the open and got lost." He ordered a beer, taking time to roll a cigarette while he let a speculative glance slide over the young rancher. The man was tall, powerful, with hazel eyes that were hard to read. Jim lit his cigarette before asking casually, "That your horse out there? That roan?"

"Yeah, that's my bronc."

"Looks like a traveler."

"He is." Newman was frankly puzzled. "Why?"

Jim took a deep drag off his cigarette. "Makes a funny track, don't he?"

"I never noticed it." Newman's voice remained level, although his eyes took on a dangerous glitter.

"You ought to look at it sometime," Jim drawled innocently. "He drags his hind feet, bad. I been admirin' those tracks off and on all the way to town."

Newman took a short step away from the bar. "What're you drivin' at, Yates? Come to the point!"

"The point?" Jim echoed blankly.

"What's bitin' you, Chad? Shucks, I was just commentin'."

"Yeah?"

"Shore. Hell, there's no law ag'in a man lookin' at a horse track, is there?"

"Depends," Chad said flatly. "Don't get any ideas, cowboy."

"I won't," Jim assured him pleasantly. He drained his beer, set the glass carefully on the bar, and grinned. "I already got all the ideas I need. I'll be seein' you, Chad."

He waited only until he was sure Chad had grasped the full meaning of his words, then turned out of the saloon, whistling cheerfully. He didn't have any proof that would stand up in court—yet—but at least he knew who he was fighting. And Chad Newman knew that he knew. Maybe it would force his hand.

Fat Downey pulled his big feet reluctantly off the desk as Jim strode into his office. The man's bald head and pudgy face were shiny with perspiration, and his clothes clung to his bulk like wet sacks. The only thing about him that wasn't sloppy was the highly polished badge on his vest.

"What's on your mind?" he asked unpleasantly.

"Nothin' that'll interest you much," Jim drawled as he threw one long leg over the corner of the desk. "Just another murder, that's all."

"Yeah? Who this time?"

"Harvey Towne."

Downey pulled a dirty handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead. "What happened to him?"

"He got shot," Jim said bluntly, "while he was tryin' to find out who was usin' a brandin' fire up on Fall Creek."

"Are you sure it was a brandin' fire? Did you see the rustler?"

"Well, o' course somebody mighta built the fire just to get warm," Jim drawled acidly. "It's shore chilly today."

Downey didn't even flush under the sarcasm, but his beady eyes flared hotly. "Did you see the calf? Can you prove that a calf

was actually rustled. What can you prove?"

"I didn't come in here to report a rustlin'." I came in to report a murder, and I can *shore* prove that the boy is dead. Shot in the back. The feller that did it left a plain trail goin' east."

"That's not much to go on," Downey complained. "Even if you could follow that track through wild country, you'd have no way of provin' you got the right feller. I'll have to have more than a horse track to go on."

"Did you ever consider tryin' to find that somethin' more yourself?"

"I don't need your advice," Downey retorted flatly. "I can run this office very nicely without your help. Hell, I didn't hire out to play nursemaid to the Lazy Y."

"No, and the Lazy Y shore didn't hire you." Jim stood up, eyeing the sheriff with undisguised contempt. "I didn't figure you'd do anything about it, but I figured I'd better report it. Just for the record."

"I'll keep my eyes peeled," Downey said, "but there hasn't been a single clue come up in those other two cases."

Jim stalked out, slamming the door so hard the whole building shook. "Some day, mister," he muttered savagely, "I'll get the proof and then you'll take orders from a new boss."

AS JIM headed back up the street, he wondered briefly what his uncle would think about his deliberately holding back information from the sheriff. He wouldn't like it, probably, but Jim could see no point in reporting a mere wounding when a full-fledged murder would go uninvestigated. And he knew it would be more than foolish to make accusations against Chad Newman that he couldn't prove.

Jim dismounted in front of the town's only restaurant, brushing the dust off his clothes before striding inside. The room was pleasantly cool, and he dropped onto a stool at the counter with a grunt of relief. He looked up expectantly as Cindy Grover

hurried out of the kitchen. She was a small girl, slender but not frail, with red gold hair framing an oval face. Her smile was quick as she recognized her customer.

"Lo, Jim," she said brightly.

"Howdy, Beautiful," he answered with a grin. "Gimme a cup of coffee, will you?"

"Sure will."

Jim laid his hat on the counter and ran a hand wearily through his damp hair, then sleeved sweat from his forehead.

"Kinda hot for that jacket, isn't it?"

Cindy asked as she set the cup before him.

"Yeah, it is kinda."

She leaned her elbows on the counter, her clear blue eyes traveling over him with undisguised interest. "You look troubled, Jim."

Jim spooned sugar into the coffee, not looking at her. "Harvey Towne was killed this morning."

"Harvey Towne! Why he was in here last night!"

Jim looked up irresistibly, his glance brushing hungrily over her face. He had known a good many girls but never one who hit him like this one did.

"Same—way?" she asked hesitantly.

"Same way, except that he got it in the back."

"Oh!" Cindy's loathing for such a crime showed in her voice. "Any idea who did it?"

"I know who did it," Jim said grimly, "but I can't prove it."

"Who?"

He shook his head, already wondering why he had spoken so impulsively.

"What have you done about it?"

Jim met her gaze squarely, knowing that he was in for a bad time. "I've told the sheriff."

"Told the— That fat slob! Did you tell him who did it?"

"Nope."

"What," she demanded hotly, "are you waiting for?"

"Proof."

"Since when do you have to prove what you know? Leave Downey out of it. He wouldn't believe the truth even if you did prove it to him. If you really know who killed Harvey, why in the devil don't you go after him?"

Jim couldn't stand the furious blaze in her eyes. "I'd like nothing better," he said flatly, "but Bill is bellerin' for law and order. He wants to leave that ranch to me, and I won't have it unless I can be his kind of a cowman. Does that make sense?"

"No, it doesn't. Not when three of your men have been killed right under your nose and you know the sheriff won't do anything. By golly, if I knew who'd done it, I'd go after him myself. Harvey was a good kid."

"Don't get sore at me, Redhead," Jim drawled with a crooked grin. "I'm doing the best I can."

"Jim. I couldn't get sore at you," she said frankly, "but I'm beginning to wonder . . . Are you afraid?"

Jim slammed a quarter on the counter and stood up. "Do me one favor, will you?" he asked coldly. "Keep your mouth shut about me knowin' who did it."

"Jim, wait! I didn't mean—"

Ignoring her startled apology, he grabbed his hat and made for the door. As he reached for the knob, the door opened and Downey stepped in directly in front of him. Jim stopped short, fighting down a desire to slam a fist into the sheriff's bulbous nose.

"Get out of my way, Downey," he ordered.

"Just a minute, young feller," the sheriff replied importantly. "How come you didn't tell me you'd been shot?"

"Who told you I had been?"

"Chad Newman."

"Yeah?" Jim's chest swelled with a deep breath of pure satisfaction. *Three mistakes.* "How'd he find it out so damn quick?"

"I don't know."

Jim turned for a long deliberate look

at Cindy, who was staring at him wide-eyed. His lips drew back in a mirthless grin as he turned back to the sheriff. "Ask him sometime," he suggested softly.

Reaching out a stiff left arm, he swept the sheriff out of his way and went out without looking back.

CHAPTER THREE

Fight or Show Yellow

JIM turned off the ranch road a short distance from town and took to the open range, riding slowly and warily. He had a lot of thinking to do, and he didn't want to be interrupted by any stray bullets.

He knew positively that Chad Newman was the killer. The man had admitted it to Jim's complete satisfaction when he'd gone on the fight about the horse track. However, Jim also knew that he was going to need a lot more than his own testimony concerning a horse track before anyone else would be convinced. Newman was a rich, powerful—and feared—figure on the range, and the idea of his mavericking Lazy Y calves would be a hard one for people to swallow, particularly when the accusation was brought by a newcomer whom no one respected.

Jim fervently wished that he could win the respect at least of his own men, but he knew that nothing short of a bad fight would convince them he wasn't yellow. Even Cindy Grover was beginning to think he was a coward and that, he realized grimly, was the point of the whole mess. Chad Newman, failing to prod him into a fight and deciding he was afraid, had set out to ruin him through disgrace. He was succeeding altogether too well.

Jim found a measure of satisfaction in the fact that Chad had trotted straight to the sheriff to find out what had been said. The man had been jarred, as Jim had hoped he would be. A nervous man—or a scared

one—is quite apt to make a foolish move.

A black, moonless night had fallen by the time Jim arrived at the ranch. His side pained and burned with a constancy that was wearing him down. He felt shaky and very tired but confidently expected that by morning he would be all right except for soreness.

The ranch house was dark and Jim hoped guiltily that old Bill had already gone to bed. If the old man were awake, Jim would have to make a report that he'd just as soon save until morning.

A light shone in the bunkhouse, and Jim could hear a low mutter of conversation as he ripped the saddle from his horse and turned the animal loose. Then he heard his uncle's voice, raised angrily, coming from the bunkhouse. Jim swore feelingly. Briefly he considered going on to the house and avoiding a meeting. Then he knew he couldn't do it.

He took time to roll and light a cigarette before leaving the seclusion of the corral, and by the light of the match he examined the front of his jacket to be sure no blood stains or bandages were showing. He had no desire to answer or evade a lot of pointed questions.

He realized, as he headed for the bunkhouse, that he was even more tired and sore than he had thought but he pulled his hat down low over his eyes and straightened his aching body as best he could. Hell with 'em. He stopped just inside the door, blinking in the glare of the hanging lamp, noting the suddenly expectant appearances of the five cowboys. His uncle was not present.

"I thought I heard Bill in here," he said slowly.

"He just left." Curly came casually off his bunk and started forward, hunching his big shoulders suggestively. "I'm glad he ain't here. I like *that* jigger."

Jim had turned toward the door. Now he swung back deliberately, his nerves raw. "It's no secret that you've never liked me. What's on your mind?"

"Several things." Curly came to a slow halt before him, his blue eyes sliding with measured calculation over Jim's body. The other boys had come to their feet and were slouching nearer with ill-concealed eagerness. "Old Bill told us all about you before you ever came. I had my doubts then and I've still got 'em. We've been discussin' it, and I reckon I've got to find out."

"Find out what?"

"What your guts amount to. You've been sidesteppin' fights ever since you got here. Old Bill seems to think it's because you're decent, but I think it's because you've lost your nerve. I think you're just a four-flusher, slidin' along on a worn-out reputation."

The time for talk was past. Jim waited cold-eyed for the call he knew was inevitably coming.

"You're supposed to be hell on wheels," Curly went on relentlessly, "but I'll bet drinks for the outfit you can't even take me. Unless you try it right here and now, I'll *know* you're yellow."

Jim flipped his cigarette out the door, wondering how long he would last. "Let's get it over with," he grunted.

He struck hard and fast, following up that first sudden blow with a series of short jabs that rocked Curly back on his heels. The big cowboy tried to guard, but Jim battered through his defense, fending with his left arm and putting everything he had into a right to the jaw.

Curly went down like a dropped sack of flour. Jim stepped back, already panting. He had spent most of his meager strength in one ferocious onslaught, figuring that a quick knockout was his only chance. He didn't make it. Curly rolled, shaking his head groggily. Then he was getting up, and Jim knew it was only a question of time.

He was strangely devoid of feeling in the matter except for a grim amusement at his own weakness. He was going to get licked, but maybe he could leave a few marks to show for it. He ploughed in

again, taking three blows in the face for the privilege of landing another solid right on Curly's jaw. The cowboy staggered but he didn't go down, and suddenly Jim laughed.

"What's so damn funny?" Curly wanted to know, instantly suspicious.

"'Fraid you wouldn't see the joke," Jim retorted.

He made no effort to guard. That would only prolong the agony. During the next few moments he got in blow for blow, but his had no power behind them whereas Curly's were landing with force. Then came the one Jim had been dreading—a paralyzing smash into his left side. His hands dropped and he just stood there, staring helplessly at the big fist heading for his jaw.

He landed hard on his back, and it was a long moment before he could summon the strength to roll to his hands and knees.

"Still funny?" Curly demanded bitingly.

Jim looked up with a sickly grin. "Gettin' funnier by the minute," he admitted in a strangled voice.

He got up and was promptly knocked to one knee. He slugged Curly in the stomach as he went down, then grabbed him around the legs and spilled him. Jim was slightly the heavier, but his weight could not make up for the wooden slowness of his arms. Curly kicked him off and scrambled to his feet.

Jim staggered erect and went in again. Nausea was like a writhing snake in his stomach, and the tilting, swirling room didn't help it any. He was aware of the other cowboys, yelping and grinning gleefully, but Curly's face was the only thing that mattered. He drove at it blindly until another fist came out of nowhere to send him down.

After that he lost track of the number of times he hit the floor. The specific pain in his side got lost in a general ache that was blacking him out. He couldn't breathe; he couldn't find his legs but still he kept

clawing up, only to bump into that fist again. Vaguely he realized that the other boys were no longer grinning, and he wondered about that. From a great distance he heard Curly's voice asking him if he'd had enough.

"Hell no," he gasped. He wiped a sleeve across his eyes, trying to locate Curly in the foggy darkness that surrounded him. He finally found the cowboy, his strained and red-streaked face shimmering there in the gloom. Jim reached out for him but failed to connect. He didn't even see the fist that finished him.

IT WAS late the next morning when Jim left the house and headed for the corral to confront the boys. He looked and felt like hell, but a vague hope tugged at his spirits.

He had regained consciousness in his own bed, with old Bill working over him and sputtering like an old hen. "Why in the hell didn't you tell 'em?" he'd demanded hotly.

"I'd just been sidesteppin' another fight."

"Yeah, but— Well hell!" Bill had a glint in his eye that wasn't all disgust, although he tried to hide it. "They say if you really want to find out what a feller's made of, watch him when he's gettin' licked. Those damn young hellions should have found out plenty!"

That remark, coupled with the hazy remembrance that the boys had quit grinning, made Jim wonder if the fight had done more than just make hamburger out of his face. He found the cowboys hunkered in the shade of the bunkhouse, resting from the strenuous job of shoeing horses. Curly slowly climbed to his feet as Jim approached, his face a study in anxiety and shame.

"Bill said you wanted to see me," Jim said without preliminaries.

"Yeah. I just wanted to tell you I had no idea you were hurt last night. I didn't know it 'til we opened your coat when we were trying to bring you 'round."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Gosh, Jim, I feel awful. I ain't tryin' to get out of anythin', but I shore don't want you to think I'd pull a trick like that on purpose."

"You're missin' the point, Curly," Jim replied, his voice hard. "As far as that fight's concerned, forget it. I did my damndest to lick you, and it's not the first time my damndest wasn't good enough. What I want to know is whether or not you'd care to repeat what you called me."

"No. Hell no. I'm convinced." Curly grinned ruefully, rubbing a bruise on his jaw. "Plenty convinced."

"I'm not askin' you to believe what Bill says," Jim went on. "He's got some wild ideas about me and a man'd be a damn fool to believe 'em, but I don't like to be called yellow."

"You won't be, ever again, around here."

"Then let's forget it." Jim stuck out his hand and Curly met it instantly. They both grinned, a little foolishly. "First time we go to town I'll buy those drinks."

"I'll buy the drinks," Curly corrected, "and glad of the chance, boss."

"Well, we'll all have one anyway." Jim squatted on his spurs, feeling a tingle of exhilaration. It was the first time any of the boys had called him boss, and that one word took a lot of ache out of his assortment of bruises. He noted that the other boys were watching him, bright-eyed and expectant, but he took time to roll a cigarette before drawling casually, "I found out who our rustler is. Chad Newman."

"Chad Newman!" Curly's startled voice echoed the surprise on the other cowboys' faces. "What's he got against this outfit?"

"Nothin'. It's Cindy Grover."

Curly digested that in silence for several moments. Then he said dryly, "He went kinda strong, didn't he, just to cut the competition away from his girl?"

"It's not the first time a man's killed because of a woman, and Chad strikes me as a jigger who'd enjoy the killin'."

"Yeah." Curly's voice was grave. "Are you sure, Jim?"

"Dead sure," Jim returned flatly. Briefly he told them the evidence, which he saw convinced them completely. "But we've got to get proof," he finished. "If I move against Chad without it, folks'll think I'm just tryin' to alibi a jealous killin'. Besides I promised old Bill I'd do this legal."

"Legal and careful," Curly said bluntly. "That damn Chad is greased lightnin' with a gun. Of course—" He broke off, flashing an embarrassed grin at the gun riding low on Jim's right thigh.

"The way I figure it," Jim said slowly, ignoring the subtle compliment, "Chad is hair brandin' weaners and dogies and turnin' 'em loose. Or maybe he isn't brandin' 'em at all. Maybe those fires were just a plant to get you boys on the warpath and put me in a bad light for not goin' with you. The fact that he had to kill a few fellers just made it all the better from his viewpoint, and I don't reckon he figured there was a chance in the world of his gettin' caught."

"He'd be the last person anybody'd suspect of maverickin'," Curly agreed, "but I ain't too much surprised at the killin'. Chad always has been a mean sone-of-a-buck."

"And with Downey in as sheriff," Jim pointed out, "he knew blamed well he could run off every cow in the country and the law wouldn't ever know it unless somebody tattled. Chad's made a few bad mistakes, though. One of 'em was shootin' Harvey in the back. He might have claimed self-defense for the other two but not for that. Another mistake was in cuttin' calves away from the cows. He's got to wean those little fellers somewhere. If we can find that corral, maybe we can find some kind of proof that'll stand up in court."

"It'll never get to court," Curly said flatly. "Chad can't be arrested."

Jim stood up, his hand dropping automatically to the butt of his heavy gun.

"Maybe not," he said softly, "but he'll never leave the country!"

Curly came to his feet like a coiled spring, his eyes shining eagerly. "This," he murmured, "is gettin' interestin'. C'mon, boys. Let's go find that corral."

CHAPTER FOUR

New Law for Fall Creek

AS JIM and the other boys headed in to the corral to catch their horses, Curly strode around to the blacksmith shop where he had left his own horse already saddled. In a matter of seconds he was back to report that the horse was gone.

"Looked like old Bill's track," Curly declared. "Where in the hell you reckon that old jigger's goin' and how did he get away from here without us hearin' him?"

"Saddle up for me, will you Curly?" Jim requested. "I got a hunch . . ."

Anxiety stirred in him as he headed for the house. He remembered now the queer light that had stolen into the old man's eyes when he heard it was Chad Newman that Jim was after. Jim's anxiety swelled to genuine fear as he saw that Bill's belted six-gun and rifle were both gone from the wall of the office.

Jim returned to the corral at a run, snapping at the boys to hurry. "I told him we were goin' to look for that corral," he explained tersely. "He must have had some old trap in mind that Chad might be usin', but why in hell didn't he say so?"

The Lazy Y cowboys were tight-lipped and worried as they loped out on the trail of Bill Yates. Bill had held the horse to a walk until he was out of ear shot of the ranch and then had lifted him into a hard gallop, heading for the rough rocky country that lay above and beyond the head of Fall Creek. Jim knew that nothing short of the grimmest purpose would make old Bill get on a horse, since he had a bad leg that gave him fits when he rode. However, he

couldn't have had more than thirty or forty minutes start, and Jim fully expected to overtake him before he had gone far.

He reckoned on catching up with him without considering the terrain. Old Bill knew where he was going and the cowboys didn't, which meant that they were slowed repeatedly, cutting for his track on hard ground, while the old cowman pushed on at a steady gallop. The trap he had in mind, if that were his idea, must have been abandoned years ago since none of the younger cowboys had any knowledge of its location.

They crossed Fall Creek above the spot where Harvey had been killed and entered the rocky stretch where trailing was even slower. Jim used his eyes on the country ahead, trusting the boys to follow the track; but he caught no glimpse of a horseman. Then, as they tipped off into a steep brushy canyon, the nickering of a horse sent them plunging headlong to the bottom.

They found, first, an old pole trap, sagging around a secluded spring, containing the bodies of five calves, freshly killed. Then they found Bill in the brush, lying face down over his rifle fifty yards from the corral. With a trembling hand Jim rolled him over, swearing at the ugly smear of blood high on his left side. Then he saw that his uncle was looking at him wearily.

"I went back on my own preachin', Jim," he mumbled weakly. "I was afraid Chad would kill you. No law strong enough to stop him. . . ."

"Don't try to talk," Jim interrupted swiftly. "Get some water, somebody."

Curly read the sign while Jim fashioned a quick sure bandage for the wound. He had just finished when Curly returned, to hunker on his spurs and roll a cigarette.

"Reckon Chad got spooked." Curly's drawl was mild, but his eyes were glinting with fury. "Came out here bright and early to kill them calves and cut the brands out."

"CN," Bill whispered huskily. "Fresh.

I got a good look 'fore Chad got here, and I know one of them calves. Belongs to that high-horned, line-backed cow."

"I saw her three days ago," Curly nodded grimly. "Lost her calf all right."

"That's all—we—need!" Jim slammed his right fist into his other palm, exultantly.

"My damn horse—gave me away," Bill mumbled apologetically, "or I'd have—taken the job off your hands."

"Better this way, Bill," Jim told him. "We've got proof for the law now. Ike, you head for the ranch. You can get a wagon up to Fall Creek. The rest of you rig a stretcher out of saddle blankets and lug him out of here. I'll send the doc out."

Curly stood up, hitching significantly at his gunbelt. "I'll help you." Jim started to protest but Curly cut him short. "How do you figure this now?"

"He'll head for town, innocent as hell! He must figure Bill's dead."

"Sure, but . . ." Curly cocked one eyebrow skeptically. "You gonna bother the law with this?"

"You're damn right I'm gonna bother the law!" Jim said fiercely. "That damn badge-toter will take my orders this time."

Ike, already mounted for the ride to the ranch, whirled his horse over close and leaned from the saddle. "You be careful, boss," he warned. "Me'n the boys don't want to break in a new foreman."

Jim and Curly made short work of the ride to town, arriving at the doctor's house on spent horses. As Jim stalked inside, he was glad to find Hobbs, a lanky, gray-haired merchant, getting a dressing put on a snagged finger. Jim didn't waste any time on greetings.

"You're needed out at the ranch right away, doc. Old Bill's been shot."

"Shot! Bill?"

Hobbs came to his feet angrily. "Who did it this time?"

"Come down to the sheriff's office," Jim invited coolly. "You'll find out, and I'd like to have a couple of reliable citizens

on hand. Doc, you can sit in too while the livery's gettin' your rig ready."

The two men asked no questions as they hurriedly donned their coats for the walk to the sheriff's office. Jim walked with them, leading his horse and maintaining a provocative silence.

There was no CN horse in front of the saloon, nor any horse along the street anywhere that looked as if it had been ridden hard. Still Jim didn't hesitate. He felt sure Chad Newman would come back to town, smugly confident that he had killed his trail.

As they passed the restaurant, Jim saw Cindy Grover peering out of a window, her face tight with apprehension. He couldn't help wondering whether that apprehension were for him or someone else, and a cold lump of dread settled in his stomach. He touched his hat brim and was rewarded by the quick lifting of one hand, but she didn't smile.

CURLY loped ahead to order the doctor's rig from the livery corral and was waiting for them by the time they reached Downey's office. The four men strode into the room, finding the sheriff, as usual, with his feet on the desk.

Again Jim wasted no time with greetings. "I've found out who's been rustlin' our cattle," he said evenly, "and killin' our men. I want you to arrest him."

"Yeah?" Cautiously Downey pulled his feet off the desk, his beady eyes shifting nervously from one to the other, finally coming back to Jim. "Who?"

"Chad Newman."

"Chad—" Downey choked. "Aw, you're crazy!"

"I'm not crazy and I'm not guessin'. I knew yesterday who it was but I couldn't prove it—then. He killed Harvey Towne and shot me off my horse. This mornin' he killed five head of Lazy Y calves wearin' a CN brand. Bill saw the brands and he knows the calves, and Chad shot him for

sein'. Is that enough to satisfy you?"

"Jim," the doctor interposed, shocked, "are you positive of all this?"

"Ask Curly."

The doctor and Hobbs both turned to Curly, who nodded grimly. "It's sure the gospel. We're due for a hangin' party."

"No." Downey fumbled for his handkerchief to mop his face and head desperately. "I can't arrest Chad. He won't let me."

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WESTERN STORY
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Jim whirled savagely toward the two townsmen. "This is why I wanted you gentlemen here. How about it?"

"He'll have to arrest him," Hobbs said belligerently, "or turn in his badge. What the hell does he think we're payin' him for?"

"But I tell you I can't!" Downey protested frantically. "Chad would laugh at me—or kill me."

Jim shot out a hand to the sheriff's shirt and jerked him to his feet. "Then you'll deputize me!" he blazed.

Downey swept a pleading glance around the room but he didn't find the comfort he was seeking. "All—all right," he gasped. "Let go of me."

With trembling hands he felt in his desk for a deputy's badge and pulled it out. His voice also trembled as he administered the oath.

As Jim stepped back outside, Curly at his elbow, he saw Chad Newman entering the saloon up the street.

"She's all over but the shootin'," Curly murmured tightly. "God, Jim, be careful!"

Nonchalantly he lifted his left hand to his shirt pocket, covering the badge as he stepped into the room. He didn't want anyone taking shots at that badge before his eyes became accustomed to the gloom.

Chad turned his head lazily. "Friend Jim!" he exclaimed, smiling. "Where—" He broke off as Jim lowered his hand to reveal the badge. "Where'd you get that badge?" he demanded, instantly wary.

"From the ex-sheriff of the county," Jim drawled coolly. "You're under arrest."

"What for?"

"You know what for, and I can prove it. Get your hands up."

Chad turned carefully away from the bar, making no move to lift his hands. "You can't prove anything against me," he said narrowly.

Jim was perfectly balanced, ready. "Uncle Bill," he explained evenly, "isn't dead."

Chad's hazel eyes flamed yellow with sudden fury. He moved his right hand as if to lift it, then stabbed blindly for his gun. Jim had reached for his gun when Chad's hand first moved, and now the weapon was coming out smoothly, tilting upward to spout flame a fraction of a second before Chad's gun blasted. Jim fired twice in rapid succession, both shots slamming into Newman's left shirt pocket.

Slowly Jim sheathed his gun, wiping a sleeve across his wet face. Curly stepped forward to put a hard hand on his shoulder. The cowboy was grinning broadly. "About that reputation of yours—" he began.

Jim tossed a coin on the bar. "Have a drink," he said, "on account."

He turned out of the room, ignoring Hobbs' efforts to shake hands. That could come later. With long, determined strides he crossed to the restaurant and entered, not even closing the door behind him. He saw Cindy step out of the back room and stop, but Jim kept right on going until he was within reach of her.

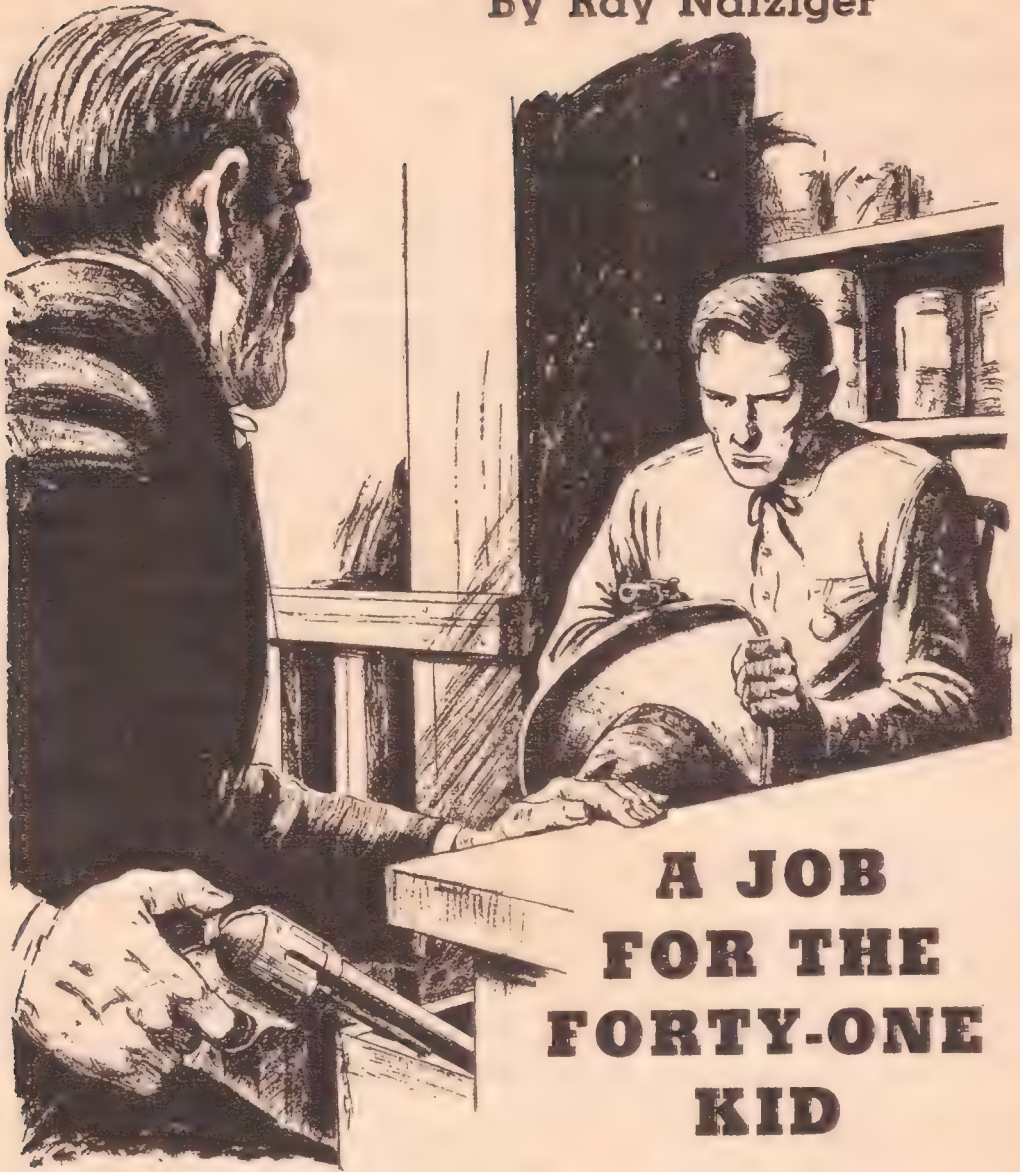
"You'll have to know," he said evenly, "and I'd rather it'd come from me. I just killed Chad Newman."

"Oh, thank God!" She tumbled against him to bury her face on his chest. "Jim, I've been so scared. I knew yesterday, the way you looked at me, that he was the one and oh—he's wicked!"

"Was wicked," Jim corrected. Try as he would, he could not keep his voice level. His arms had gone around her automatically when she fell against him, and now they tightened possessively. "Y'know," he told her, "old Bill's been afraid I couldn't settle down and quit hellin', but I reckon it'd be easy if a man was married."

Her head popped up and for a moment she stared at him breathlessly. Then, as a pink wave stole over her face, she cast one brief glance around the quiet room and smiled happily. "One restaurant," she murmured, "for sale cheap." ■ ■ ■

By Ray Nafziger



Milliken was fast all right; his hand was a blur of motion.

Men said that ice ran in the Forty-One Kid's veins, and that he'd shoot his own mother in the back for the gold in her teeth. But that was before he rode into Val Verde....

A JOB FOR THE FORTY-ONE KID

WHEN the big horse-faced stranger entered Jim Creswell's saloon, the Forty-One Kid was at the faro layout, keeping cases.

Evidently the Kid had been described to the stranger, for the newcomer stood at the bar eyeing the slight, boyish-faced gunman closely.

The Kid, with his slight wiry body and

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thin, sharp features, looked like a young puncher spending a few hours in town. His head of curly hair, the color of cured grama grass, was bare; his black sombrero lay on a chair at his right. Bedded down in the wide brim of the hat dozed a black and white pup, the size of a kitten.

At the Kid's left hip, butt reversed, rode the old .41 caliber six-shooter from which he'd gotten his nickname. Except for the weapon, there was nothing about him to bear out his reputation of professional gunman and hired killer. Sleepily he watched the turn of the cards and batted occasionally at the flies which buzzed indolently in the warm air.

At the far end of the bar stood the saloon owner, fat Jim Creswell. A cud of tobacco knotted in his jaw as he noted the stranger's scrutiny of the Kid. Sizing up the arrogant face, a little swollen and red from too much drink, the big body soft with too much food; Creswell guessed what the stranger wanted. Deliberately he waddled along the bar.

"My name," he said, as he stopped near the visitor, "is Creswell. The Kid hangs out here in my place. I'm as near to bein' a friend of his, I reckon, as anyone ever gets. And the Kid never yet," he went on casually, "has had any complaint from the men what hired him."

The lips of the stranger spread in a sudden snarl. "If I want to hire the Kid," he rasped out, "I'll whistle him up and deal with him direct."

Fat Jim Creswell shook his big head "I wouldn't was I you, mister. Nobody whistles up the Kid, an' he don't like dealin' direct with men what come to hire him. He looks on 'em all as polecats. That's why I allus sorta act as his agent. Mister, you can speak up free with me. The Kid, he kills men on order, it bein' a business with him, like keepin' a saloon is with me.

"You want a man put out of the way, and you heerd the Forty-One Kid's the

jasper to pop a whip over such jobs. You couldn't find a better. Finishes the job neat an' orderly an' never spills a word about it afterwards. And never any complaint from a man what hired him."

THE big horse-faced stranger glowered at Creswell and then glared at the Kid. Maybe he was trying to fit the kid to his deadly reputation.

A horsefly bumbling along, as if made drunk by the whiskey-scented air, suddenly swooped down on the pup sleeping on the rim of the Kid's sombrero on the next chair. Startled, the pup snapped awake and began a fierce yapping at the intruder. The Kid laughed softly, and then, as the fly continued to buzz threateningly over the pup's head, he turned from his faro case and shot out his hand, thumb and forefinger extended into a pincer.

The big stranger stared. The Kid had caught the fly between his thumb and forefinger as easily and surely as someone might pick a ripe peach from a tree. Then turning, he flung the insect through the open window. The pup wagged his tail in thanks and promptly went back to sleep on the hat.

"The Kid looks like a boy," said Creswell. "But they don't come no slicker with a gun. And he ain't no lowdown shoot-'em-in-the-back killer that skulks around waitin' to put a man in the back. He allus gives the other man first shot. It's a matter of honor with him. No sir, they don't come no faster than the Kid. Nor no tougher. Nor more cold-blooded. Got a chunk o' granite for a heart, the Kid has. Not a soft spot nor a weak place in him. Just a *killin' machine."

"He may be tough," admitted the stranger, "but if he tried to doublecross me, I'd be a little rough myself. I've killed a few in my day. And I'm warning both you an' him," he growled, "if anything goes wrong, I'll—"

"Sure," broke in Creswell genially. "We

savvy that. Just leave the name of the gent yuh have in mind, mister, and it's just the same as if a coffin had a'ready been ordered."

"This ain't no tough job," explained the stranger. "It's easy as hell. Why, a half-grown boy could pull it. But I want it done by somebody from outside my range, see? Somebody I can count on keepin' his mouth sewed tight. I'm from over at Val Verde. Know where that is?"

Creswell nodded. "Yeah. Take a good hoss to carry a man there in two days. Now, as to terms—"

"Two hundred dollars for the job," growled the stranger. "Take it or leave it."

Creswell rubbed an ear thoughtfully. "Mister, you'd have to fork over five hundred. The Kid don't bother with nothin' under that. And it's in advance."

"Five hundred! In advance? Like hell! I pay for what I get—after I get it."

Creswell shook his big head. "Mister, you had your ride for nothin'." He stated it, so decisively that the stranger knew he could do no bargaining here. With a curse he suddenly surrendered. From a vest pocket he began taking folded bills, one after the other until he had five of them.

Creswell tucked the five hundred-dollar bills away as indifferently as if they were the cards of whiskey salesmen.

"I'll see that the Kid gets the name of the man after he reaches Val Verde," said the stranger. "And by God remember—no doublecrossing!" He shot a malevolent look at Creswell and then at the Kid.

The spotted pup, getting up from the hat, was crawling over on the knees of the Kid. The Kid cradled the pup between his knees so he wouldn't fall off, and yawned. He had not once looked in the stranger's direction. . . .

IT WAS three days later, and the Forty-One Kid, wearing a white shirt and black string tie, was swearing silently at the stage coach in which he was being

jounced rapidly toward Val Verde. The Kid had started the trip horseback, but his mount had developed a lameness which made it necessary to leave him. It was the first trip the Kid had ever made in a stage coach, and he decided it would be the last. A long-nosed female passenger whose tongue clacked unceasingly above the rumble of the wheels made the trip no easier.

At a change station twenty miles from Val Verde, a connecting line coach from the head of a railroad had deposited two passengers, some mail sacks and express, and a dog on a leash.

The dog was an oldish Irish setter, a handsome, high-bred animal, mahogany red in color. The setter evidently cared no more for stagecoach travel than the Kid. Tied outside the station, lonely and travel-sick, he was giving out a melancholy whimpering. When the Forty-One Kid strolled over, the setter looked at him and liking the Forty-One Kid's looks, wagged his tail in a friendly greeting.

The Kid squatted to pet him, but the talkative woman passenger rushed in between them, with a burst of admiring cries. The red setter politely bore up under her silly cooing.

He was a gentleman, the red setter, which was more than could be said of the loud-mouthed stage driver.

"What kinda deal is this?" he growled, as he glared on his four-foot passenger with disfavor. "I ain't s'posed t' take no dogs. I'm drivin' a stagecoach—not a stock car. Where's that dog goin'?"

"Val Verde. He's for that drunken bum of a English remittance man," said the station tender. "That there dog's come all the way from England."

"I don't give a damn where he come from," snapped the driver. "Where's he goin' to ride?"

"Suit yourself; he's billed as express," said the station man, who was plainly afraid of the driver. "Tie him to an axle and drag him on behind, for all I care."

"He can ride on the floor of the coach at my feet, the bee-yoo-tiful doggie can," purred the woman passenger. This seemed as good a solution as any, and dog and passengers climbed inside.

The Kid, small and inoffensive looking, sat in the corner as the stage, behind its team of six half-broken horses, rumbled up a long arroyo, and across an endless flat covered by creosote brush.

Striking a stretch of caliche, pitted by deep chuckholes, the stage began to pitch like a boat in a storm. Not unnaturally, the setter began to get sick.

"You disgusting creature, get away from me!" cried the woman. "Driver! Driver!" she screeched. "Stop! The dog is getting seasick!"

The brake blocks rasped against the wheel rims, and the stage stopped with a lurch. The big driver got down with a black frown on his beefy face.

"Come outa there, yuh damn cur!" he roared. "I'll learn yuh to mess up a coach I'm a-drivin'!"

Reaching inside, he grabbed the end of the setter's leash and jerked the animal from the coach. The dog hit the ground with a bump.

"I'll learn yuh!" bellowed the driver. Just as the Forty-One Kid clambered down, the man drew back a boot to deliver a kick.

The Kid's eyes glinted suddenly, and he stepped in, hooking his left boot in the up-raised foot of the driver, neatly throwing the man off balance.

"I wouldn't kick that dog if I was you," remarked the kid evenly. "He couldn't help gettin' sick. The way you drive it makes me kinda sick myself."

THE driver, big enough to make a pair of Forty-One Kids, stiffened, swelling like a toad. "You wouldn't, would yuh?" he exploded. "Gettin' sick, are you, you little shrimp? Look who's talkin' to me! A small bottle o' weak beer. Who yuh

think you are? Bill the Kid? Or Jesse James?"

His ham-like palm slapped the butt of the holstered gun that swung on his hip, his left hand still holding the setter's leash.

The Kid straightened from where he'd been leaning against a wheel. His tawny eyes apparently weren't looking at the stage driver, but at a mountain peak in the distance. One slim hand was on his cross-draw six-shooter. He spoke softly as if he might be asking some bartender for a drink. "Lay a hand on me," he remarked tonelessly, "and I'll kill you right in your tracks."

The driver stood stock-still, but his hand came away from the black-butted gun. His big fists clenched in bunches of hard knuckles, and he looked at the passenger for the first time—really looked at him. He saw that his passenger's eyes were as expressionless as two chunks of volcanic rock. And he saw also that when the Kid had declared he would kill the driver, he had meant exactly that.

For a moment the driver hesitated, his big face red with rage. Then he sputtered and abruptly dropped his hands and climbed to his seat.

With the Irish setter back in the coach between the Kid's knees, the coach went on at a slower pace. The closeness of the Kid, the few words he occasionally murmured, seemed to comfort the dog.

When the coach climbed a long, steep hill, the Kid descended and walked, giving the setter a chance to stretch his legs. The dog sniffed delightedly through the grass alongside the road and exuberantly chased a rabbit. Then, flushing a small covey of quail, he remembered his training as a hunting dog and came to a point.

To please him, the Kid picked off two of the birds with his six-shooter. The big driver noticed that the Kid had snipped off the heads of both birds, and his face became a little less ruddy.

It was noticeable that when the coach

went on, the driver drove the rest of the way to Val Verde as carefully as if he were carrying a load of dynamite.

THE town of Val Verde lay, as its name indicated, in a little green valley, its adobe houses forming brown rectangles under the bushy-topped cottonwoods. In its center sprawled a dusty plaza, the business district, comprising a few stores and saloons.

The Kid got down at the stage station and the setter leaped down behind him. Then the dog gave one loud bark and jerking the leash from the Kid's hand, exploded in a frenzy about a tallish man who had come to meet the stage.

He was a queer-looking specimen of a man; gaunt, with ragged beard and hair, dressed in soiled breeches, shirt and scuffed old boots that would have disgraced even a range tramp. Round and round this individual the setter tore, leaping and barking madly, completely beside himself with joy.

The man knelt in the dust and put his arms about the dog, saying over and over in a high-pitched, excited voice. "Well, well, Red, stout fellow!"

Plainly this was the Irish setter's master the drunken British remittance man. But for the dog no one else existed—not even the Kid who had saved him from the stage driver's punishing boot.

The Kid grinned a little, and went into a saloon for a beer to wash the alkali dust from his throat. Afterward, he dropped into a restaurant to eat. As he looked out of the window, he noticed a familiar face among the passersby, a man who had come from the biggest store on the plaza. It was the same big, horse-faced stranger who had entered Jim Creswell's saloon a few days before to order an unknown man killed.

As the heavy-set man passed, the Kid looked at the restaurant owner. "Isn't that Judge Smith from San Elizario?" he asked.

"Him? Naw. That's Tom Milliken.

Owens the big store up street, and half this county, to boot. He's no judge, but his brother is. That's how Tom Milliken got most of his money. His brother appoints Tom to administer estates of men that die here, and when them two crooks get through, they got the estate and the heirs got nothin'.

"Somebody's goin' to kill that ornery son some day. And the town will give a medal to the gent that does it!"

The Kid nodded noncommittally and finished eating, he drifted into a cool, almost deserted Mexican saloon, waiting for Tom Milliken to send him the name of the man he wanted killed. Listening to a blind Mexican who was sitting out on the sidewalk playing a small stringed harp, the Kid was not even thinking of the job. To his hardened, fatalistic soul, life was tied up tightly with death. He had been raised on powder smoke; he had fought through a deadly range feud at eleven and he was a full-fledged gun-warrior at thirteen. Before he was fifteen his father and every other male relative had been killed in that same war. People who knew that he had hired his fighting ability out for money regarded him as a dirty polecat killer, but they never said it to anyone who might carry their words to the Kid.

HE HAD been in the place half an hour when the dog and his owner entered. The remittance man was weaving a little on his feet. But though he might be a staggering, drunken god, to the Irish setter he was still a god.

Bleary-eyed, the man stared about the saloon, then smiled at the Kid and came over. "My name is Wade Moultrie," he said in a strangely clipped accent. "They tell me that you saved my dog from being kicked by that brute of a stage driver. I want to thank you. I'd like to buy you a drink, but—" He spread his hands, indicating that he lacked the money.

"That's all right," said the Kid. "Have

one on me. What do you want to have?"

The Kid waved Wade Moultrie to a chair at the table. The setter looked at the Kid, then identifying him and considering his master in good company, lay down close to the feet of the drunken man. It was plain to see that the setter considered himself the protector of this man who had become a sodden drunkard, a man who had lost both pride and hope.

Moultrie freely admitted his shortcomings to the Kid. His family had sent him to the "States" with several thousand dollars which he had dropped on an almost valueless gold mine on the Estancia River. He had leased it to some men who were taking out a little ore. He received from England a little money each month, which he spent the first week on drink. He was clearly a miserable weakling who had thrown away his life. He was ignored and looked down upon by everyone—except by the setter, Red.

"I've arranged to pay his board the first of every month before I start in swilling," he said. "It's the least I can do. Red would die for me."

"He's a good dog," said the Kid. "I like dogs. I'd give a lot to own Red." He smiled a little. "I'd almost kill a man for the chance of owning a dog like that."

When Moultrie staggered out finally, with the setter close beside him, the Kid realized that it was the man who went with the dog, rather than the dog with the man.

Dusk was beginning when a Mexican came in, slipped a piece of paper into the Kid's hand, and quietly went out. The Kid was listening to the blind harpist who was playing a tune he had never heard before.

The Kid hummed the tune softly, tossed a dollar to the bartender to give to the harp player, and looked at the piece of paper the Mexican had handed him.

On it was printed the name of Wade Moultrie. There was nothing else.

The Kid looked at it for a long time, then he pushed back his hat. "What you

know about that?" he asked himself. "And I just got through saying I'd almost kill a man to own that dog!"

A bunch of cowboys had come into town, a wild outfit that was celebrating. Their guns sent thin spurts of orange flame toward the darkening sky as they raced their ponies around the plaza, kicking up clouds of dust. A horse began pitching and threw his rider into the muddy irrigation ditch that ran along one side of the plaza. With great hilarity his friends fished him out.

The Kid, whistling thoughtfully the tune he had just heard, headed up the street. On the way he ran across Moultrie, snoring collapsed peacefully on the step of a vacant store, with the red setter keeping guard over him. Men going by laughed and jeered at the drunkard the dog guarded. The setter growled at them. No one would care if Wade Moultrie was alive or dead—except old Red. It was sure an easy way for the Kid to earn five hundred dollars. Anyhow, Wade Moultrie was better off dead. . .

THE Kid stepped into the corral, dug into a hip pocket, brought out a small, stubby-barreled gun. Wrapping a handkerchief around the handle, he put it carefully in the crease in his sombrero and then carefully replaced the hat on top of his head. That done he took considerable time walking up the street toward Milliken's store.

Customers and desks were up front; but horse-faced Milliken sat in a railed-off place at the back which served as office. He drifted in quietly and sat down in a chair across from Milliken's desk, removing his sombrero and holding it on his knees.

For a moment of malignant silence Milliken glared at him. "Well?" he snarled after awhile.

"Mister Milliken," said the Kid softly. "I want to talk to you. You know who I am, I reckon."

"No, I don't know you," snapped Milli-

ken. "I never saw you before. What do you want?"

"All I want is to tell you I'm not doing that job you hired me for."

"Why the hell not?" growled Milliken, keeping his voice low.

The Kid's slight shoulders shrugged. "Just don't care to do it—that's all."

"I see. And you figure on keeping the money." It was a statement rather than a question. Milliken's little eyes were hard. "You figure I'll be afraid to open my mouth—that I'm scared of you. Is that it, Kid? I knowed you for a doublecrossin' little skunk soon as I laid my eyes on you."

Silently the Kid brought out five bills folded flat and placed them on the desk. They were the same bills Milliken had given Creswell.

"I don't want your money," said the Kid evenly. "That Moultrie is worth less than nothin' to himself or anybody else—except a old setter dog. But I sort of like dogs and, account of what he means to that setter, you'll have to hire somebody else to get him."

Milliken's face was the red of live coals. "Oh, no, I won't Kid," he said, keeping his voice low only by tremendous effort. "You don't back out on me. I see your game. I heard you been treatin' Moultrie to drinks this afternoon. You figure you'll play up to him an' throw me over. He's probably bought you out. You've heard that mine that he's got leased out has turned into something rich. And you figure by telling him what I aimed to do, you'll ride high along with him. Yeah, you're a plumb wise jigger, because them big ears of yours heard that they struck a rich vein in his mine. You're goin' to work on that before he finds it out. Ain't that so?"

"No, I hadn't heard," said the Kid calmly. "So that's why you want him rubbed out? Then your brother, the judge, can appoint you to look after the estate after Moultrie's safely out of the way."

"You can't run no sandy on me," went

on Milliken, his rasping voice suddenly rising. His little eyes gleamed triumphantly as he saw the Kid sitting holding the big black sombrero on his knees. "By God, you damn cheap little tinhorn killer, you ain't gettin' out of here alive!"

Milliken brought up his hands from beneath his desk, and in one of them was a six-shooter. The customers in the store were discreetly staring at the two from a distance.

The unblinking stare of the Kid made Milliken nervous. Suddenly he raised the gun, thumbing back the hammer. The man was fast all right; his hand was a blur of motion.

But the Kid, with his fingers on the gun he had placed in his black sombrero, tilted the short barrel above the brim and fired.

Tom Milliken never even pressed the trigger. He slumped forward, then slid out of his chair to the floor, expelled one gusty sigh, and lay still.

The Kid looked at him. He shook his head a little and then shrugged his shoulders. One hand raked back the five bills still resting on Milliken's desk. What could you do? The damned fool had simply committed suicide by refusing to believe the Kid was not double-crossing him. Milliken was so crooked he couldn't believe anyone else might be straight. Nor could he understand that the Kid might really only want to do a high-class dog a favor by refusing to kill the dog's master.

The Kid would have to see the Englishman and tell him he was a rich man. As for the killing, Milliken had practically threatened to shoot his visitor in the hearing of half a dozen men in the store. It was a clear case of self-defense.

One afternoon three days later, the Kid sauntered into Jim Creswell's saloon.

"Hello, Kid," Creswell greeted him genially. "How did you make out?"

"Huh?" said the Kid, who had all but forgotten what had happened at Val Verde.

(Continued on page 111)

TWO-BIT HERO

By William Vance



Cherokee turned slowly because Jed Winthrop held a gun in his grimy hand. . . .

"Guns and shells cost money," was Cherokee's plaint . . . till he learned that the lack of them might cost his own life.

THE sheriff said, "Won't cost you a dime, Cherokee, an' it'll sure be a big help to me."

One of the possemen grinned. "Wear his wagon seat down some," he said.

Cherokee Durham was used to this. He put the point of his bony shoulder against a wagon bow and leaned out to look at

the girl. She was a spare thing, he thought, with a peaked scared face and a cloudy look in her blue eyes, standing there beside the big sheriff, almost cowering.

Cherokee Durham, the medicine man, wasn't stingy. It was just that he knew the value of dollars, having been without them the greater part of his life. His dark

eyes lifted from the girl to the sheriff. "How 'bout the bridge toll?" he asked in a flat, disinterested voice. "It's two bits a head for passengers, besides a dollar for my rig."

The sheriff laughed and tossed a silver dollar to the gaunt man who sat on the seat of the covered wagon. A badly-painted sign on the weathered canvas said **CHEROKEE'S CURE-ALL**. In smaller letters underneath the same uncertain hand notified the world that Cherokee's Cure-All was good for coughs, colds, aches and pains of all kinds and every affliction on earth.

Cherokee caught the dollar and slowly took out a long leather purse and un-snapped the top and deliberately dropped the coin in the capacious depth. He rolled the purse and carefully returned it to his inside coat pocket. He said, gruffly, "Get up here, woman. Ain't got no time to waste."

The sheriff helped the woman up over the front wheel. She sat on the seat as far away from Cherokee as she could get, huddling forlornly in the corner. Cherokee hardly glanced at her as he lifted his lines.

The sheriff put his hand on Cherokee's knee. "Leave her off with my old woman," he said, low-voiced. "We'll have her man come daylight."

Cherokee looked at the girl. She gave no indication she'd heard the sheriff. He grunted and flicked his lines and chirked to his team. They moved out of the shade of the buildings into the blinding yellow heat of a morning sun.

The wagon road ran straight across the sagebrush flats and disappeared into the purple of the foothills. It took Cherokee a half a day to make it to Starve-acre Ford and during that time the girl hadn't spoken a single word. Cherokee didn't mind. He wasn't a talkative man either, except when he put up his medicine for sale.

Cherokee pulled the team off the road and into the dusty willows that lined the creek. He took out the horses and led them

down to water and afterward poured a small measure of grain into nosebags.

"You kin go to the crick and fresh up whilst I make some coffee," he told the woman. He helped her down over the wheel, feeling the bony hardness of her hands and feeling disturbed about it. He watched her pick her way around through the willows and down to the creek, trying to rid himself of the pitying feeling that grew on him.

HE BUILT a small fire and when she returned he had the cold lunch he'd fixed that morning ready, together with the coffee.

"Ain't much," he said, "but it'll do."

She said, low-voiced, "I'm not hungry."

His hand stopped with the tin cup halfway to his lips. He felt the bite of irritation in him. "Gotta keep up your strength," he said grumpily. He blew noisily into the coffee cup and then sipped his coffee.

"Why?" she cried suddenly. "Why should I?"

He looked into the tin cup, slightly rusty around the handle. "Brung it on yourself," he said laconically.

"That's what they all say," she said, her blue eyes dry and bright. "But it's not true. I haven't seen Jed for four years until yesterday."

"You got a bill of divorcement?" Cherokee wanted to know.

She shook her head, a hopelessness settling on her. "I never had the money. I left him when we was married three months. I knew what he was. I came to Caliente and got a job with Morse."

"The freighter?" Cherokee asked.

She nodded. "I did right well, too. He promoted me from bookkeeper to cashier. Then yesterday Jed and these two other men walked in. They ki—killed Mr. Morse and took all the money. The two men with Jed were killed. One of them didn't die right away and he identified Jed."

"Why'd you try to run away?" Cherokee's coffee was cold. He drank it anyway, being a man who didn't waste anything.

"What would you have done?" she asked. "It looked bad for me. I was scared sick. I didn't know what to do. So I ran away. You don't believe me, do you?"

"For certain," Cherokee said. "I believe you." He did too. There was something about the woman that conveyed honesty and character.

"But the others," she said. "They won't."

"Better try'n eat," Cherokee advised.

"I can't," she said. Her eyes were no longer dry and bright. She put her face in her hands.

Cherokee carefully wrapped the remaining food and stowed it carefully in his wagon. He put the team in again. He helped the woman up to the seat. He said, "Get that blanket out'n the back. Make the seat a little softer." He had his foot on the hub when the rider came out of the willows.

The man's face, darkened by sun and wind, was unshaven and his eyes red-rimmed. His horse was spent. The woman cried out, "Jed!"

Cherokee dropped his foot from the hub and turned slowly because Jed Winthrop held a gun in his grimy hand. "Won't do you no good to run or try'n do anything," Cherokee said.

Winthrop kept his eyes on Cherokee after one quick look at the woman standing there with the blanket in her arms. Winthrop bared his yellow teeth in a snarl. "Mebbe so, mebbe not. Where's your guns?" He slipped to the ground with a sinuous motion that reminded Cherokee of a snake slithering over the rocks.

"Don't carry one," Cherokee said. "Guns cost money an' so do shells."

Winthrop walked up to Cherokee and slapped his hand against Cherokee's ribs

on both sides. He satisfied himself the medicine man had no gun and then he swung up on the wagon and crawled over the seat and disappeared beneath the cover. He was out in a moment, grinning, holding a bottle of Cherokee's Cure-All. He knocked the neck off on the wagon rim and took a long drink of the dark liquid. "Not bad," he said. He took another drink and tossed the half-empty bottle into the creek.

"That'll be four bits," Cherokee said.

Winthrop looked at him, balancing the gun in his hand. "Charge it," he said. He put a foot on the wagon wheel and dropped to the ground. "Stay right where you are," he warned. He unsaddled his windbroken horse and threw the saddle over the tail gate of Cherokee's wagon. He slipped the bridle and tossed that after his saddle. He took the horse by the hackamore and disappeared among the willows. A shot broke the stillness and in a moment he was back.

The outlaw motioned with his gun. "Git up in that wagon," he said.

Cherokee stepped to the wagon and stood there, feeling the wagon shake and hearing it creak as the killer climbed over the tailgate and pulled the canvas down. In a moment the killer's gun bored into Cherokee's back.

"Ain't aimin' to hurt nobody," Winthrop growled, "less I hafta. You jest go 'long like you was before. You git me acrost that river and I'll be hard to ketch."

Cherokee sat down and lifted his lines. He spoke to the horses and the wagon moved across the creek.

The finger of rutted, rocky road turned south on the sagebrush bench. Late that afternoon the wagon jolted and groaned over a dry rocky wash and then swung wide to plunge downward to the river, with the slender thread of wood spanning the gorge. The canvas behind Cherokee swished across and the gun probed him through the fold of rough cloth.

"Don't make no mistakes," Winthrop's

hard voice said from behind Cherokee.

"You can't get away with it, Jed."

There was a note of hysteria in the woman's voice.

"Shut up, Nora," the voice said in the same hard note.

They came up to the river and Hy Epperly, keeper of the toll bridge, moved out, waving his hand to them. The old man was white-haired but still as erect as a young sapling. "Didn't see nothin' o' Winthrop, did you, Cherokee?"

"Ain't been lookin' for him," Cherokee said shortly.

The old man cackled. "Sheriff and his men're inside eatin'. Better light and fill up. You'll never make Caliente fore dark." He shaded his eyes and looked at the westering sun.

"That'd cost money," Cherokee said. "I'll hold out till I get where I'm goin'."

Epperly cackled again. "Might know," he said. He raised his sharp old eyes to the woman. "Maybe you'd like a cup o' coffee, ma'am. 'Twon't cost a cent."

"Ain't got no time to waste," Cherokee said, feeling the gun in his spine again and hearing the faint click of a hammer drawing back.

"Dollar for the team and two bits a head," Epperly said.

Cherokee got out his leather purse and unfolded it. He deliberately counted out the money. The old man started to speak and then he stepped back and waved his hand. "So long, Cherokee," he said. "Come again."

THE horses' hoofs and the wagon wheels combined to make a rumbling thunder on the bridge, bouncing off the walls of the gorge, shutting out all other sound.

The horses ran the last fifty feet on the downgrade, the britching tight against their hams, the wagon tongue rearing in the air, pulling collars away from sweat-strained necks. They hit the rocks and the wagon jolted and twisted. Cherokee grabbed the

woman around her slender waist and jumped as the guns blasted.

The sheriff's posse were all around the wagon, with their rifles drawn and cocked. "Throw out your gun, Winthrop," the sheriff called. "Come out with hands in the air or we'll fill that wagon full o' lead."

There was a long silence, broken only by the bawl of the river in the gorge below and the heaving of the horses. A pistol landed in the dust and a booted and spurred foot came out and then Winthrop himself stood there, staring at them. His red-rimmed eyes darted from one to the other like a cornered animal, finally resting on Cherokee.

"I'll git you for that," he said.

Cherokee offered the woman his hand. "Hurry," he said, and helped her to the seat. He followed her, gathering up his lines. His gaze rested briefly on Winthrop as they tied his legs underneath a horse's belly.

Hy Epperly cackled happily. "'Twas me, really," he said. "Any time Cherokee gives a man two bits extra, suthin's wrong." The old man grinned. "He gimme a dollar for his team n' wagon and that was all right. It was them three two-bit pieces that made me know somebody was inside. An' in this here country a man jest don't hide 'less somebody's lookin' for him. That is for sure."

Cherokee spoke to his horses and they moved out into the twilight away from the bridge. The lights of Caliente showed in the distance. Contentment settled on Cherokee. He'd watched the woman back there and there'd been nothing but relief on her face when Winthrop was taken. He clucked to the horses. "I guess I'm 'bout the best-known feller in these parts," he said. "Most all o' 'em think I'm a skinflint."

She was silent for a long while. Then her hand reached out and touched his for a moment. "I like a savin' man," she said quietly. ■ ■ ■

Double Death

A True Story by Bill Osborne

WHEN the kind-hearted folks of Vail, Arizona, lynched a man they made it a humane point to give the victim a "good, long drop." They even went to the expense and trouble of building a six-foot high platform, on wheels, for the charitable purpose.

When the good citizens felt it necessary to terminate some culprit's stay on this earth, they simply rolled the platform out to the great oak hangtree on the edge of town, placed it under the sturdy limb over which the rope was thrown, and forced the unwilling subject of the proceedings to get up and stand on it. The noose then being put around the luckless throat, the rope was pulled taut. The hangee could either jump, or the platform would be jerked out from under him—he was politely given his choice. In any event, he was assured of a long drop. What more could a man want?

Up to a certain spot in the usual procedure, Barker Green was no exception. For what the populace considered a good reason—stabbing an unarmed man in the back—Barker was taken out to the hangtree on a sunny afternoon in October, 1883. Cool, calm, and still boastful, Barker Green stood erect upon the high platform. Two men, delegated for the task, climbed up beside him to adjust the noose.

"Want to say any last words before you git your sore throat?" one of the hangmen dutifully asked.

Barker Green's eyes searched through the mob below him. "Yes," he answered. "I sure do." He pointed down at a sad-eyed, graying old man in the crowd. "There's Jed Murphy. I got somethin' to say to Jed."

"Hurry up an' say it."

Barker Green grinned cruelly. "Jed," he taunted, "for a long time you been wonderin' and tryin' to find out who kilt that precious son of your'n. You been always sayin, as how, sometime, you'd catch him, and make him pay for th' kid's death. That's all you say you been livin' for. Th' day you'd git revenge." Here Green laughed loudly. "But, th' joke's on you! I kilt your son! I did it! But—I'm gittin' hung for killin' that stranger, yesterday. Not for killin' your worthless pup. Now, you don't get your revenge you been braggin' about. I can only git hung once!"

Jed Murphy, who had been mourning the loss of his only boy for a long, long time, was momentarily stunned, especially at Green's last remark: "I can only git hung once!"

Suddenly the old man made his way to the front of the mob. Beloved and respected by all, they listened as he spoke. "Folks," he said. "Here is th' killer of my boy—an' he's laughin' at me. I got a favor to ask. Givin' him a long drop is too good for him. Take the platform away. Hang him the slow way, for killin' my son. Pull him up from th' ground. Th' slow part will be for my boy. Th' death will be for th' stranger he murdered."

MORE than willing to accede to the old man's request, Green was taken from the platform, which was wheeled away. A longer rope was procured. Then, from a standing position on the ground, Green was slowly pulled into the air, hanging by his neck, struggling, kicking and gasping. The struggle was a grisly sight.

For a short time, old Jed Murphy grimly watched the jerking, suffering figure dangling on the hangrope. The crowd watched in silence. . . .

"No! No! Stop it! Stop it!" Jed cried. "Let him down! Please!"

The men handling the other end of the rope were glad to ease Barker Green to the ground. The death throes of a slowly hanging man was too much for even the most hardened of the mob to endure. They were happy and relieved that old Jed had changed his mind.

Barker Green was not quite unconscious when they took the rope from around his neck. Lying on the ground, he gasped for air. By slow degrees he recovered enough to look around him and use his voice.

"That was terrible—terrible," he said. "But—but why'd you save me? You go in' to let me go free?"

As one man the mob turned to old Jed Murphy for the official answer.

Murphy pretended to ponder for a few long minutes. Then he faced the crowd, smiled, and said, "Now bring that platform back again. This time we use it in the regular way."

"But—but, Jed," Barker Green gasped. "I thought you told 'em to let me down because you didn't want me hung."

"I told 'em to let you down for only one reason. So you could be hung again. Remember your boast that you could only git hung once? Well—this is to prove you're a liar. One hangin' is for my boy!"

The platform was wheeled into place. Barker Green, this time, was really given the "long drop." He died instantly.

The town of Vail, with the help of Jed Murphy, proved you could hang a man twice—if you set your mind to it. ■ ■ ■

RETURN OF JUDGE BEAN

JUDGE ROY BEAN, who with a single law book and a pistol—made his name famous by the sign over his door. "All the Law West of the Pecos," was famous for getting the money, one way or another.

One of the most common stories about him concerned the time he found the body of an unknown cowpoke who had died back of a saloon. The judge searched the body for identification. He found only a pistol and ten dollars on the man's body, whereupon he fined the unknown corpse ten dollars for carrying a gun in the city limits, confiscated the gun and took the ten dollars to cover the fine, and buried the man in boothill.

The old Judge has a successor of the same name, who can also collect the money. The Pecos County 4-H Club bought a young Hereford steer and named it after the county's most notorious citizen.

Judge Roy Bean, the steer, became Grand Champion of the Chicago International Livestock Exhibition, and collected \$13,800, money that would have delighted the old judge.

Allan Echols

Gun-Call!

AS HE rode into Dragoon, Owen Brady looked the saloons over, idly trying to decide which one to enter. He finally settled on the Staghorn. Brady was not a drinking man but he had just crossed an abysmally dry stretch of country and so, after watering his bay at the trough at the edge of Dragoon, he rode slowly down the main drag eyeing the saloons. Even so, it wasn't his thirst so much that prompted him to pick a saloon but the fact that he was after a bit of information and he reasoned that a saloon

was as good a place as any to find it out.

At this hour, the middle of the morning, the Staghorn was devoid of customers. In a far corner of the barroom, a swamper was making half-hearted passes with a broom at the dirt on the floor. The swamper and the bartender were the only people in the place as Brady walked in.

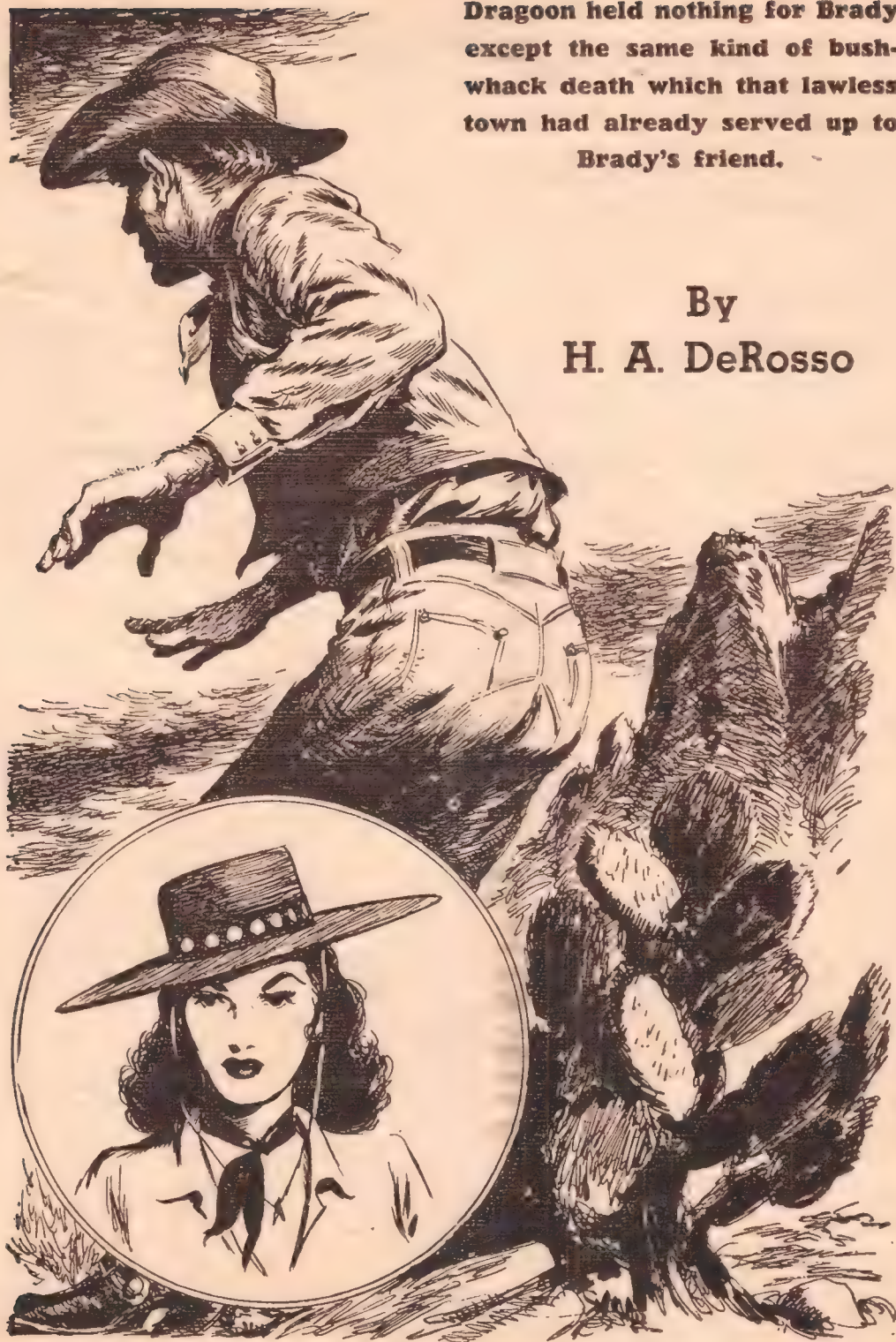
The smell of stale beer, old tobacco smoke and sweating bodies still hung sickeningly sweet in the air. Brady moved up to the bar and waited for the bartender to take his order.

The brutal intent of the man was clear. He meant to send Brady to his death under the pounding hoofs of the buckskin.



**Dragoon held nothing for Brady
except the same kind of bush-
whack death which that lawless
town had already served up to
Brady's friend.**

**By
H. A. DeRosso**



The bartender was a big, heavy-set man with thick, red jowls hanging down over the collar of his shirt. An immense paunch preceded him wherever he went. His eyes were glazed and bloodshot and had in them the patient, resigned look of suffering that comes on a morning-after.

"You got any cold beer?" asked Brady. "I just came in from the east and, after passing through that dry country, I feel just like a nice, cold drink."

The bartender gave Brady a baleful look. "You want a drink or don't you?" he asked sullenly.

Brady's eyes narrowed slightly. He was a tall man, standing six feet two. There was not much flesh to him and this gave him a deceptive appearance of frailness. He had large, long-fingered hands that were marked with rope burns. His face was thin and gaunt with a slightly hooked nose and a wide mouth that could be pleasant or hard.

A bit of annoyance swept through Brady but he decided to let it pass. "I ordered a beer, didn't I?" he asked quietly.

The bartender drew a glass that was half foam and plunked it down sullenly in front of Brady. "I don't know what you expect this early in the day," the bartender grumbled. "I ain't gonna tap a fresh keg and cool it just to satisfy you. Nobody dragged you in here."

Brady drew a deep breath. He told himself that the man was suffering from a hang-over and that there was no use letting this sullenness and rudeness get at him, but still it was an effort for Brady to overlook it. He drank the beer and found it on the edge of just getting warm which was better than he had expected.

Brady ordered another glass. "Take something yourself," he said to the bartender, and then added, "You don't have to take beer."

The man seemed relieved. He turned and Brady winced inwardly as the bartender took a bottle of bonded stuff off the

back of the bar and poured himself a generous slug. Brady dropped a gold piece on the bar and got his change.

"I'd like to know how to get out to Wes Galligan's place," Brady said quietly. "Broken Bit's his iron."

The bartender had downed his drink. He stared intently at Brady. "Why?"

A flash of irritation burst in Brady. He was getting fed up with this. His voice thinned a little. "Maybe it's because I like traipsing through this damn dry country of yours. Maybe it's because I want to exercise my horse. What the hell difference does it make why I want to get out there? Can't you give a man a simple direction?"

The bartender had dropped back a step. "All right, all right, mister," he said, holding up his hands. "Don't get your hackles up. I only asked because Galligan's been dead a month."

The shock of it left Brady numb. At first, his mind could not accept the fact. He had not been prepared for anything like this. He'd had a letter from Wes Galligan asking him to come out here and go to work for Broken Bit. Sure, the letter had been written three months ago. At the time, Brady had been knocking around and the letter had lain in the postoffice for two months before Brady had drifted home and picked up his mail. There had been nothing urgent in Galligan's letter and so Brady had taken his time getting here to Dragoon.

"How'd he die?" asked Brady.

The bartender began mopping the bar with a vigor that was entirely out of place with his previous sullen demeanor. "How should I know?" he said. "I'm not the coroner or a doctor. I just know Galligan's dead."

A chill premonition began tickling the back of Brady's neck. "How'd Galligan die?" he asked again.

The bartender stopped mopping and placed his hands on his hips. "Look,

stranger," he said evenly, "I'm a businessman. I do trade with all kinds of people. I don't ask them their politics or their personal affairs and I don't talk about them. That's why I stay in business."

Brady's mouth thinned. A cruel look came into his gray eyes. "I'm not asking you why he died but how? The why I can find out elsewhere if necessary. The how I want to know from you. Understand, amigo?"

The bartender ran his tongue quickly over his lips. "All right," he said. "Galligan was shot by a party or parties unknown. That was the finding of the inquest. Now you know as much as I do, stranger. . . ."

SINCE he had come this far, Brady decided to have a look at Wes Galligan's place or what was left of it. So, after he left the Staghorn, Brady rode south as the bartender had directed. The land rose here, lifting up into the rugged, barren mountain range that loomed ahead. According to the bartender's directions, Broken Bit lay smack up against the mountains.

On the way, Brady saw a lot of white-faces wearing the Rafter M brand: The graze was fairly good here. The land was dotted with an occasional cottonwood or pine. There was none of the dry wasteness that existed east and north of Dagoon. Down here were the best pickings of the land in this part of the country, Brady figured.

Brady topped a rise and there below him he saw two horsemen. They were in front of a gate that was the only opening in a long stretch of barb wire fence. Brady could see the fence climbing up over hills on either side and disappearing. According to what he had been told, this fence was the boundary line of Wes Galligan's Broken Bit.

As Brady sent the bay at a trot down the slope, one of the riders reined his

mount around so that he could watch Brady. The other horseman went right on with what he was doing. There was a sign tacked on to the top pole of the gate and this rider had looped his lariat around one end of the board. He dallied the other end of the rope around his saddlehorn and sent his roan ahead, ripping the sign off the gate. Brady rode up just as the fellow had disengaged his rope from the sign. Brady looked down at the board and saw what it read: *Broken Bit, Wesley Galligan, Prop.*

Brady looked up. The two riders were watching him intently. They had moved their horses so that they flanked Brady on either side. The rider who had ripped the sign off the gate was a tall, cadaverous-looking fellow. A sallow scar ran down one side of his face and he had strange, expressionless eyes so pale in color as to be almost white. He wore a high-peaked, wide-brimmed sombrero, a blue denim shirt, buckskin leggings and a big Remington .44-40 at his right hip.

The other rider was a stocky, bull-chested fellow in his early twenties. He had the front brim of his black hat pinned up against the flat crown. A cruel recklessness was evident in his round, red face and glittered in his yellow eyes. Sweat kept dripping off his chin onto the front of his red, double-breasted shirt. He wore an ivory-handled .45 at his side.

Brady said quietly, "You boys seem mighty free and easy with a dead man's property."

The two exchanged passive looks as if not much interested in what Brady had said. "For your information, stranger, this ain't Broken Bit any more," said the scar-faced rider. "This is Rafter M, all the way up into the Predicadores."

"Why? Because Galligan is dead?"

A look of annoyance passed over the man's face. "Look, stranger," he said softly, "I don't have to tell you nothing. See? Now beat it and get the hell off Rafter M property."

Anger had begun to swirl uglily inside Brady. Up to now he hadn't thought too much about Wes Galligan. They had been friends back home, but he hadn't seen Galligan in three years. Brady felt a little sad over Galligan's death, but the matter was over with, and tears could not help Galligan any more. Besides, tears did not fit into the way Brady felt about Galligan. It was just that Brady could not stand to see a dead man's property expropriated as callously as this.

"How come this is Rafter M now?" Brady asked thinly. "Because Galligan is dead, does that mean Broken Bit belongs to the first man to move in? How about Galligan's heirs? Didn't anybody bother to find out if he had any?"

The scar-faced man's mouth tightened. A faint glimmer of interest showed in his pale eyes. "Are you one of those heirs? Is that what you are, stranger?"

"I'm Galligan's granpappy," said Brady dryly.

"You hear that, Curly?" asked the scar-faced man. "We've got a joker on our hands."

"Yeah, Chalk, I heard him," said Curly. "He's real funny. I'm laughing so hard I could bust a gut. Say something else that's funny, stranger."

Both men moved their horses in close. Brady's heart was thumping dully inside him. He was fully aware of the portent of the situation. Chalk and Curly would egg him on until he could stand it no longer and when he made his move they'd cut him down. Wrath rose in Brady but he quickly subdued it for he'd be playing right into their hands by losing his head. Still it was an effort for him because he did not like this business of two against one and being caught in a whipsaw besides.

"Go on, stranger," said Chalk. "Say something. You know, you're funnier than the medicine show that was in Dragoon a while back. Lots funnier. We poor boys never find much to laugh at in this part of

the country. Go on, tell us another funny story."

"Maybe he's bashful, Chalk," said Curly. He laughed in an ugly way. "Yeah, that's it. He needs to be coaxed. Now how could we coax him, Chalk?"

Chalk's face remained as expressionless as ever, but the cruelty in him was evident in his voice. "I don't think he's bashful, Curly," said Chalk softly. "He's just yellow. I've heard about actors who got out in front of an audience and turn yellow and they can't speak a word. That's what he is. He's turned yellow and can't talk. Isn't that right, stranger? You're not bashful, you're yellow."

The anger raged in Brady's chest. He realized the folly of it but he was helpless. There was not much he could do but if he could only get one of them before they cut him down, he'd be satisfied. Just one of them. The muscles bulged along Brady's jaw.

He looked coldly from one man to the other, trying to decide which one would be the easiest for him to get. Grimly, he realized that neither one was a pushover. Both had the appearance of competent, deadly gunmen. Both undoubtedly had killed several men a piece. There wasn't much choice between them.

Brady finally decided on Curly. He was just setting himself to draw when the sound of a running horse reached Brady. Chalk's head flung up as he stared past Brady, but Curly made no move to take his attention from Brady. Curly went right on staring with that fixed, wicked look in his eyes.

The horseman rode up, forcing his mount in between Brady's mare and Chalk's roan. "Boys, boys," the fellow cried plaintively. "Let us not have violence. You know how violence distresses me. Please, Chalk."

Chalk's mouth curved down at the corners. "He comes here and sticks his nose into something that's none of his business.

I'll learn him some manners," he said.

"Please, Chalk," the newcomer cried, holding up pleading hands. "Can't we substitute reasoning for violence? Why must you western people be so prompt with your guns? Can't we discuss this like gentlemen and reach an agreement amicably?"

Curly made a derisive sound. Chalk's mouth twisted bitterly. "Mr. Maddock won't like it," he said. "You know this is all Rafter M land now. What business does this stranger have butting into our affairs? All I want to do is learn him how to mind his own business."

"As you say, Chalk, he's a stranger," said the newcomer. "Undoubtedly, he is in complete ignorance of the facts concerning this situation. I'm sure that if he's acquainted with those facts in a calm, reasonable manner, he will comprehend and act accordingly. There's no need for violence, Chalk."

Curly made a disgusted noise and reined his buckskin away. "Come on, Chalk," he growled. "You know it's no use arguing with him."

Chalk turned that expressionless look on Brady. "We'll meet again, amigo," he said quietly, and then, abruptly, spurred his roan in pursuit of Curly.

BRADY watched them go until they topped the rise and were gone from sight. Then he turned his eyes on the newcomer. The man was busily mopping his sweating face. He was a small man in his forties, dressed in a gray business suit with high-heeled boots and spurs. A black derby, grayed with dust, was perched on his head, and his face was burned a violent red by the sun. He had small, sparkling blue eyes and a small, pursed mouth. A little, round potbelly showed under his vest.

He looked at Brady and smiled in a friendly, eager way. "I'm Jasper Orion," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm an attorney in Dragoon. I also handle a little

bit of real estate on the side," he added.

Brady took Orion's hand and found it soft and limp in his. "I'm Owen Brady."

"Glad to meet you, Owen. You don't mind my calling you Owen, do you? I don't like formality." Suddenly he frowned. "That Chalk. He's so violent. I just can't accustom myself to the ways of this land. I'm not a native of this western land, you know. I live here because of my health. It's a beautiful land, Owen. I'm constantly awed by its grandeur. Such scenery! But the western people are so violent. . . ."

"Thanks for what you did for me, Orion," said Brady. "I was kind of in a spot."

"Oh, don't mention it," said Orion, waving a deprecatory hand. "I'm always happy to prevent violence. You know, Owen, I'm a laughingstock out here. Because I don't like violence, these western people deride me, but still they heed me. You saw how disgusted Chalk and Curly were but they heeded me, didn't they? Do you think they would have paid any attention to me, had I, too, attempted to employ violence?"

"Now, Owen, I do not intend to pry into your business but if I can be of aid to you, please tell me. If there is something you wish to find out that I know about, I'll be glad to tell you. Not that I want to become involved in your affairs, Owen, but if I can prevent violence by telling you what you wish to know, then I am at your service."

The man seemed eager to please, and Brady decided he might as well learn as much as he could from Orion. "What's this about Rafter M taking over Broken Bit? What's behind that, Orion?"

Orion sighed, eyes suddenly downcast. "I'm afraid it's the behind it. You see, I loaned Wesley Galligan the money to start Broken Bit. Naturally, I took out a mortgage to protect my investment. Wesley was a good lad and when he couldn't keep up the payments on Broken Bit, I always gave him extensions. I have the papers in my office in Dragoon if you'd care to examine

them. Of course, after Wesley died, I foreclosed. Grant Maddock, who owns Rafter M, wanted to purchase Broken Bit but I refused to sell. But I did lease Broken Bit to Maddock for ten years. I did it only to realize something from my investment."

"I see," said Brady. He pinned slightly narrowed eyes on Orion. "About Galligan. . . Don't they know who killed him?"

Orion looked miserable: "At the time of his death, Wesley was alone here, on his ranch. He was not employing anybody. His dead body was discovered by a lady friend of his, one Carmen Luz. That is all any one knows."

"Did Galligan have any enemies?" asked Brady.

Orion waved his arms in an exasperated gesture. "In this western country, it seems every man has enemies. These western people are so prone to violence. All they comprehend is the use of lethal weapons. They do not reason, they do not cogitate. When faced by a problem, no matter how trivial, they think only of using their weapons and destroying their opposition."

Brady was silent. He was trying to figure out what to do and he was having difficulty in reaching a decision. He had been close to Wes Galligan once. They had grown up together, and he regretted Galligan's death.

"What are you going to do, Owen?" Orion asked quietly.

"I'd like to see Galligan's place," Brady said heavily. "I've come so far I'd just like to take a look at it. After that, I don't know what I'll do. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

The Investigation Begins

BROKEN BIT'S buildings were nestled together at the foot of an immense cliff. The graze was rich and good. A clanking windmill drew water out of the earth. The house and barn and cor-

als were in excellent condition. Wes Galligan had been off to a good start, Brady thought.

He could not help feeling a little sad as he studied the layout. This was a monument to Wes Galligan's last days. This was the sum total of his efforts and dreams.

Brady had told Orion he preferred seeing Broken Bit alone, and the meek little man had ridden off without protest. Now Brady rather regretted being here alone. The emptiness of the buildings and corrals, the brooding silence that hung suspended over everything, the knowledge that Galligan was dead—all these served to depress him.

He had watered the bay at the tank and now the animal was contentedly grazing. Brady walked up to the house with the intention of entering but he found a padlock on the door. All the windows were boarded shut.

When he turned away from the house, Brady noticed a rider coming up past the corrals. The horse was a shining Arabian with much silverwork on the bridle and saddle. It was a splendid animal and, for the moment, Brady was lost in admiration. Abruptly, he realized the rider was a woman.

She sat in the saddle as if she were a natural part of the horse. She was wearing a white shirt and a black, divided skirt with a wide, concha-studded belt about her waist. A stiff-brimmed, flat-crowned, black charro hat was cocked a trifle jauntily on the side of her head.

The woman left the Arabian drinking at the tank and walked toward Brady, her spurs making small, musical sounds. She was quite tall and slim. With shoulder-length, blue-black hair. She was obviously of Spanish extraction, Brady thought, with her dark skin and round face and soft brown eyes.

She stopped about ten feet from him and stared coolly at him.

"Who are you?" she asked in a soft,

throaty voice. "What are you doing here?"

Brady felt himself arrested by her beauty, by her quiet, unassuming assurance. "I'm just passing through," he said quietly, "and I stopped to water and rest my horse. That's my bay grazing over there."

She did not look where he indicated. Her glance remained on Brady. He could feel the frank, unabashed suspicion in her eyes. "Why were you trying to break into the house?" she asked, her voice chilling.

Resentment stirred in Brady. "I wasn't trying anything of the kind," he said thinly. "And I don't like being accused of a thing like that."

"Are you with Rafter M?"

Brady's eyes narrowed. "You ask an awful lot of questions," he observed dryly. Then a sudden thought struck him. "Are you Carmen Luz?"

That broke her aloofness. Her head went back and she stared at him in surprise. "How do you know my name?"

"I'm Owen Brady. I don't know if Wes ever mentioned me. We grew up together in Colorado. He wrote to me offering me a job. That was three months ago. I just got in Dragoon this morning."

The coolness, the look of hostility abruptly left her. She came ahead quickly and held out her hand to him, her voice very contrite. "Oh, I'm sorry for what I said about you, Brady. I didn't know. Yes, Wes mentioned you. He thought a lot of you. I'm really sorry, Brady."

He took her hand, finding it long-fingered and cool. Now that she was this close he could see the faint, haunted look in her eyes, the shadow of an old, resigned pain. He was so taken in by this that he went on holding her hand and he flushed a little when she forcibly extracted it.

He did not quite know how to put what he wanted to say. He could not bring himself to come out with it baldly, so he said, somewhat awkwardly, "Did you know Wes very well?"

The shadow passed visibly through her

features. She hesitated, then said, "Wes and I were good friends. I knew him almost from the day he came to Dragoon. That's all, we were—good friends. What might have come of it there's no use thinking since he's dead and that has certainly put a definite end to it." She looked at him narrowly. "What are you going to do, Brady?"

He could not get over the feeling that there was more to it than she had put into words. She had tried to pass it off too casually, too indifferently, but he had sensed the deep-hidden hurt in her voice. She and Wes Galligan had been more than good friends, Brady thought.

"I don't know," he said slowly, answering her question. "I came here to go to work for Wes. He gave no hint in his letter that anything was wrong but then Wes never was much for putting anything down on paper in detail. He said he had a good thing here and he had room for a good man and would I be interested. So I took my time coming down here and when I do get here I find he's dead." He paused, staring at her, not liking to bring any more hurt to her, but he did want to know. "I was told," he went on gently, "that you found his body. Where was he shot?"

Color went slowly from her face, leaving it a sickly gray. Her lips turned stiff. "What does it matter, Brady?" she said in a hoarse, troubled whisper. "He's dead, isn't he? What does it matter who found his body or whether he was shot or died a natural death? You can't bring him back to life any more. Why bother about him then? The only thing to do now is to forget."

He reached out and grabbed her arms. An ugly premonition was stirring inside him. His voice thinned, came sibilantly out through his teeth. "Where was he shot? I want to know, Carmen. Tell me now. Where was Wes shot?"

Her head dropped back and for an instant she was staring far beyond him as if she were seeing the horrible, heart-breaking

moment all over again; then her gaze pulled back to his face and two tears came out of her eyes and trickled crookedly down her cheeks. Her voice was a broken, aching gasp.

"In the back, Brady. In the back. . . ."

BRADY rode back to Dragoon, reaching the town after nightfall. He put his bay up at a stable and then took a room in the St. George Hotel. He ate supper in the hotel dining room and then went into the bar for a drink or two before going to bed.

He was halfway through his glass of beer when Jasper Orion came into the place and joined him. Orion insisted on buying Brady a drink and then he took Brady's arm and steered him to an empty corner table.

Orion peered at Brady a while out of blue, blinking eyes and then sighed and said, "I'm glad to see you again, Owen. I was afraid you would run into Chalk and Curly again."

Brady sat silently, staring down at his beer. He was tired; he had learned unpleasant things this day and he was in no mood for talk.

Orion cleared his throat in embarrassment. "How long will you be staying in Dragoon, Owen?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," said Brady, still looking down at the table. "I don't intend staying here very long but before I go there are some more things I'd like to find out."

"About Wesley Galligan?"

"Yes." Brady's eyes lifted. A hard look came into his face. He was just beginning to comprehend some of the things he felt impelled to do, and their gravity left him somewhat grim. "I'm not crying about what happened to Galligan," he said quietly. "The way I look at it every man has to die sometime and whether it's by a bullet or a knife or of old age or from drinking too much it makes little difference. There aren't different degrees of being dead and how you get that way doesn't make any

difference once you are dead," she stated.

"Also, I'm not trying to make anything out of the way I felt about Galligan. We grew up together. We always were pals of a sort, but, the way I look at it, that doesn't obligate me one way or another. A man has to take care of himself and if he isn't up to it that's his tough luck. So I'm not crying because Galligan picked up a stray piece of lead."

He leaned across the table and tapped Orion gently on the chest. "But I will say this much, Orion," Brady went on in the same quiet, earnest tone. "A man's life is a pretty important thing to him and when he has to lose it there should be some reason for it. There should be somebody interested enough to find out why he lost it. I don't hold with this idea of finding a man shot to death and just simply forgetting about it because it's something unpleasant to think about or to investigate. All I know is that Galligan was shot to death. I want to find out why. If the answer satisfies me, I'll pick up peaceably and leave Dragoon and never come back. If the answer doesn't satisfy me . . . Well, we'll see, we'll see."

Orion was rubbing his chin with a small, delicate hand. He seemed immersed in thought. Suddenly he lifted those bright eyes, staring intently at Brady. "You aren't by any chance connected with the authorities?" he asked.

Brady shook his head. "I'm no lawman."

"Then possibly Galligan has a family or relatives in Colorado who are interested in the reasons for his demise?"

"Galligan's folks are all dead. It's like I told you, Orion. I got a letter from him offering me a job and so I came. It wasn't until I got here that I found out he was dead."

"I see," said Orion, dropping his gaze to the table top. He sighed deeply. "Consider. You are a stranger here in Dragoon. You know no one. However, I have resided here for a number of years. If you

would like to make an investigation, Owen, you have my fullest cooperation, if you want to avail yourself of it. I know the sheriff, Amos Hall, and I will take you to him. There is also here in Dragoon a former employee of Wesley's, one Jake Esmond. I will guide you around, Owen, if you will allow me. I warn you I will not indulge in violence and I must insist that you refrain from it while you are with me.

"It is late now and I gather that you are very tired, but we could do all this in the morning. At nine o'clock."

THE next morning Owen Brady waited impatiently in the lobby of the St. George for Jasper Orion to show up. Brady would have preferred going about it alone, but Orion had seemed so anxious to please, so anxious to do something to help that Brady did not have the heart to refuse the man's offers. Brady was amused by the man's horror and concern with violence and Brady felt that this was a good tonic for his mind since there was nothing else pleasant about his experiences since he had come to Dragoon twenty-four hours previously.

Promptly at nine Orion arrived. He offered to buy Brady a drink, but Brady refused, saying he just had had breakfast. Orion then led Brady to the sheriff's office which was in the adobe jail just around the corner from the St. George.

Sheriff Amos Hall was a tall, lanky man with a sunken chest and a mean, ill-tempered glint in his eyes. A huge walrus mustache bisected his gaunt face, dipping down around the corners of his mouth.

Orion introduced Brady. Hall gave Brady a sharp, irritated look. "So you're the hombre who's come to Dragoon to raise such a fuss about Galligan?" Hall said in a surly tone.

Brady felt anger stir in him. "I haven't raised any fuss at all," he said evenly. "I came here because Galligan had a job for me. When I get here I find that Galligan has been dead a month. I learn he was shot

in the back. I want to know by who and why."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Hall dryly. His eyes narrowed while he stared piercingly at Brady. "This job Galligan had for you. What kind of a job was it?"

"How should I know? He didn't go into details in his letter. I suppose it was punching cows."

"Are you sure it wasn't stealing them?"

This time the anger burst out hot and vicious in Brady. "Wait a minute," he growled. "Before you go making any accusations or insinuations, sheriff, you better have proof or I'll rip that badge off your shirt and shove it down your throat!"

"Owen, please," Orion cried, fluttering beseeching hands. "No violence. You promised."

Hall's features flushed. The walrus mustache quivered. With a visible effort he controlled himself. "Before you get your hackles up, Brady, let's get a few things straight. How long since you last saw Galligan?"

"Three years."

"Isn't it possible for a man to change in three years?"

Brady felt wrath surge in him again. "What are you trying to do?" he cried. "Are you trying to make a criminal out of Galligan?"

Hall's eyes glittered, his mouth thinned under the mustache. "I told you to wait until we got the facts straightened out, Brady. I was told you went out to Broken Bit yesterday. Did you stop to think how Broken Bit is situated? Those mountains behind Broken Bit, the Predicadores—do you know that beyond them is Mexico? There has been quite a bit of smuggling going on through the Predicadores, smuggling of many things, including stolen cattle. Now understand, Brady, I am not accusing Galligan of anything officially. He's dead now and that's the end of it. While he was alive, Rafter M reported a heavy loss of stock to rustlers, Grant Mad-

dock accused Galligan. I was working on that when Galligan was killed. Since then, Rafter M has made no more complaints. That's how she stands, Brady. You can take it any way you like."

Brady could not bring himself to believe any of it, no matter how it was stated or who stated it. "You still haven't told me anything, Hall," he said thinly. "Who was it that shot Galligan in the back? Rafter M?"

Hall paused. A thoughtful look came into his eyes as if he were debating with himself about what he should say. Finally he said, "Look, Brady. Officially I don't know anything. Galligan's body was found by the Luz girl and that's all that I know for sure. But, if you won't get hot about it, I'll tell you what I think personally, as a man and not as sheriff of Hays County."

"All right. I'm listening."

Hall drew a deep breath. "I'll admit I have no proof, Brady, but I wouldn't be afraid to bet my life that this is how it was. Galligan had a falling out with his pals and one of them shot him when he wasn't looking. You can believe what you want about Galligan, Brady. I have my opinion of him, too, and that's the impersonal opinion of a sheriff and not the opinion of a lifelong friend. Remember, you haven't seen Galligan in three years, Brady."

Brady smiled bitterly. "You're forgetting one thing, sheriff. If Galligan and some pals of his were rustling Rafter M stock and if Galligan had been killed by one of his chums, would that stop the rest of them from rustling Rafter M beef? Or was it the other way around? Was Rafter M rustling Broken Bit stock? Was that why Galligan was killed, to keep him from talking?"

Hall flushed and slapped the flat of his hand down hard and loud on the top of his desk. "I've had enough of this, Brady. Do you think you can come all the way from Colorado and tell me how to run my business? The case of Wes Galligan is closed

in Hays County. Whether you like it or not, it's closed. Now get out of here. I'm a busy man!"

OUTSIDE on the street, Brady paused. He was all mixed up and he was not at all certain what to do next. He glanced at Orion and the man quickly averted his eyes and lowered his head. Orion looked very miserable.

"Where do I find this Jake Esmond you mentioned?" asked Brady.

"I'm sorry, Owen," Orion said contritely.

"Where do I find Esmond?"

Orion sighed. He took out a handkerchief and began mopping his sweating face. "He's undoubtedly in a saloon. The Palace should be a good place to start. He's usually there at this hour of the morning."

Jake Esmond was a short, heavy-set man with the carmine nose and red-shot eyes of the habitual drinker. He had an immense paunch that lapped over the top of his trousers. When Brady and Orion came into the Palace, Esmond was swamping out the place to earn himself a few drinks to carry him through the day.

A violent distaste filled Brady as he spotted the man. For an instant Brady wondered why Orion had even bothered to mention Esmond, but then Orion was just trying to be helpful in his bumbling, eager way. Of course, if Esmond had worked for Galligan, the man might know something. So Brady controlled his disgust and decided to find out what he could.

Orion called Esmond up to the bar and bought him a shot of whiskey. Esmond grabbed the glass eagerly, but his hand trembled so much in lifting the drink that he spilled most of it down his shirt front.

"This is Owen Brady, Jake," said Orion. "He wants to ask you something. Go ahead, Owen."

"I understand you worked for Wes Galligan," said Brady. "How long ago was that?"

Esmond stared at Brady as if in distrust.

He batted his eyes a while as if he were carefully going over something in his mind. Finally he said, "About three months ago."

"You worked for him how long?"

"A little less than a month."

"What kind of a man was Galligan?"

Esmond started looking around, staring everywhere but at Brady. Finally, as if in desperation, Esmond glanced at Orion. "Go on, tell him, Jake." Orion said quietly. "There will be many drinks for you if you co-operate."

Esmond hung his head. "I don't like to talk this way about a dead man, Brady," he said in a low voice. "But remember you asked me. Galligan was all right, I guess. He was a good boss in certain ways but . . . I don't know how to say it, Brady. He—he was running off Rafter M stock and passing them through the Predicadores into Mexico. He wanted me to join him but I'm not that kind so I quit Broken Bit. Remember you asked me about it, Brady."

Brady's mouth tightened. The muscles bulged along his jaw. He could feel the wrath building up inside him. "If you knew about this rustling, Esmond, why didn't you report it to the sheriff?"

Esmond's head was still lowered. "Galligan threatened me. He said that if I said anything about it to any one he would kill me and not in a nice, quick way either."

"You're a goddam liar!" Brady cried.

"Please, Owen," Orion said, plucking at Brady's sleeve.

"You're a dirty, rotten, stinking liar, Esmond!" Brady shouted, angrily brushing Orion's hand aside. "If there was any rustling going on, it was Rafter M stealing Broken Bit beef. This is all Rafter M's doing. They wanted to get rid of Galligan so that they could take over Broken Bit. Rafter M paid you to lie, didn't they, Esmond? Who put you up to it? Was it Mad-dock? Was it Chalk? Was it Curly? Tell me, Esmond."

"Owen, please!" Orion cried, fluttering his hands.

"You asked me," Esmond mumbled, turning away. "You asked me, Brady."

"All right, I asked you but I didn't ask for lies. I'm still asking, Esmond. I'm asking for the truth!"

ESMOND started to shuffle away. Brady reached out, spinning the man around. Brady's open palm lashed out, catching Esmond across the cheek. Esmond cried out hoarsely and stumbled against the bar.

"I've had enough," Brady growled. "I've had enough of dirty, stinking lies. The truth, Esmond. Who paid you to lie? Who shot Galligan in the back?"

He slapped out again, rocking Esmond's face sharply to one side. The man cried out in pain and then began to sob. "The truth, Esmond," said Brady, raising his open palm again.

It was when he had his hand high that he felt the bore of the gun grind against his back. Brady froze. Because of the intensity of his hate and anger, he had not been aware of the bartender coming up behind him. The bartender shoved hard on the gun he had pressed against Brady's back.

"Outside, mister," the bartender said. "Don't ever show your face inside the Palace again. Get, now!"

Brady walked to calm his wild, unreasoning rage. He walked with long, angry strides all the way to the edge of Dragoon, out to where he could look over the barren, dismal face of the desert. Orion tagged along hurriedly, anxiously behind him.

Brady was aware of Orion's presence but Brady ignored the little man. Finally the wrath simmered down and Brady glanced at Orion. The man looked abject and utterly miserable.

"Why did you do it, Orion?" asked Brady. "You knew what Hall and Esmond were going to say."

Orion spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "You would have discovered the identical facts if you had gone out on your own. You're so violent, Owen, like all

western people. You would have had yourself killed had you proceeded on your own. You might have made inquiries of the wrong people and they would have misinterpreted your intentions."

Brady stared broodingly out over the desert. "Why didn't *you* tell me these things about Galligan?"

Again that helpless gesture. "I can not bring myself to villify the dead."

"Tell me what you think, Orion. Do you believe all this about Galligan?"

Orion hesitated. Brady turned his sullen, brooding stare on the fellow and Orion hastily lowered his eyes. "I had a genuine affection for Wesley, Owen," Orion said slowly. "He was almost like a son to me. In my heart I can not bring myself to believe all these things about him but I must face the facts, however unpleasant they might be. In all of Dragoon, in all of Hays County, you will not find a single person, Owen, outside of myself, who will say one kind word about Wesley Galligan."

Orion lifted shy eyes. "Will you be leaving Dragoon now, Owen? That would be the prudent thing to do. There is nothing here in Dragoon for you but violence and death."

Brady slapped his hand sharply, loudly against the holster at his side.

"No!"

CHAPTER THREE

A Tough Decision

THE rest of that day Brady remained in his room in the St. George, trying to decide what course of action to take next. He went over all the possibilities, he explored all the ramifications, and he came to the conclusion that there was nothing good in it for him. He realized that the matter was deeply involved and that he did not stand much of a chance for success but he just could not bring himself to pick up and return home, leaving Galligan's

memory to fade on a note of viciousness and evil.

He found himself thinking now and then of Carmen Luz and he was of half a mind to look her up and talk to her about Galligan again. But he remembered how upset she had been, and, because he did not want to hurt her again, he put that thought from his mind.

Along toward evening, Brady came down from his room and had supper in the hotel dining room. Then he went outside. He still was not certain of what he intended to do, and this inability to arrive at a definite conclusion irritated him immensely.

He passed the Palace and, for a moment, he considered the Staghorn, then finally, with a shrug, settled on the Trail Bar. There was a good crowd inside the Trail, and Brady had to walk the length of the room before he found a place at the very end of the bar.

He could feel people watching him, some of them cool and impersonal, some appraising and calculating. By now word of his presence in Dragoon and the reason for it must be common gossip. So he was not at all surprised by this interest in him.

He sipped his beer slowly, still trying to arrive at some decision. He was in the Trail perhaps ten minutes when the swing doors parted and Curly and another man entered.

Brady had a good position here at the end of the bar. He could observe everyone who came in and went out. He saw Curly give a swift perusal of the place and then almost instantly spot him. Curly nudged his companion and then fell behind him as both moved on down to the end of the bar.

Brady knew this was for him and so he stepped a little away from the bar and waited. Curly's companion was a large, pompous-looking man, dressed in an expensive, tan riding habit. His riding breeches were tucked into the tops of slick, highly-polished boots. The man, who was probably in his fifties, had gray hair and a

neatly-trimmed gray mustache in the middle of a brown, stern face. He was unarmed.

He had a quirt dangling from his wrist and he kept smacking the whip loudly against the tops of his boots. He came to a stop and gave Brady a long, arrogant look.

"Are you Brady?" he asked.

Before answering, Brady glanced past the fellow at Curly. A wide, eager grin split Curly's face. There was nothing pleasant or friendly about the grin. Brady returned his stare to the big man and nodded.

"I am Grant Maddock of Rafter M," the large man said in a sonorous tone as if he were proclaiming the second coming. "It has come to my attention, Brady, that you have made scurrilous remarks concerning me and Rafter M. I demand that you give me your instant apology!"

"I have nothing to apologize to you for, Maddock."

"You have plenty to apologize for," said Maddock, his face flushing. "You have accused Rafter M of rustling Broken Bit stock. You have implied that Rafter M was responsible for Galligan's death. Galligan was a liar, a scoundrel and a thief. Apologize this instant, Brady!"

The portent of it put a fleeting hesitation in Brady. He understood very well what was coming. He could see it in Maddock's deliberately offensive manner, in the avid anticipation in Curly's grin. Then a wave of heedless anger swept over Brady. He had swallowed all the ugliness thrown at him so far and he had suppressed his desires, his impulses. He had his fill of it. Suddenly he didn't care any more about the consequences.

"You can stop being subtle, Maddock," he said thinly. "You can step aside now and let that grinning monkey behind you take over for you."

People quickly moved away from behind Curly. A table clattered over and chairs clashed and then an evil, expectant silence settled down over the Trail. Maddock's

fists clenched. His mouth gaped open but no words came.

Brady glanced past Maddock at Curly. "How long since you climbed down out of your tree, Curly? What's the matter? Haven't you learned to talk yet? Does this big windbag have to do your talking for you? What do I have to do? Toss you a coconut?"

Curly's grin evolved into a grimace of snarling rage. "Step aside, Mr. Maddock," he growled.

"Yes, Maddock, step aside," Brady mocked. "You've done your part. Now step aside. You're in the way."

Maddock's mouth worked soundlessly once, then he hurriedly stepped back, coming up against the wall, standing there as if transfixed. Curly's chin had ducked down against his breast while he glared at Brady out of uplifted eyes. Curly's right hand poised above the ivory handle of his .45.

"I'll learn you to talk like that to me," he snarled.

"What's stopping you?" jibed Brady. "Are you waiting for me to turn my back like Galligan?"

Curly's face diffused with blood. "Damn you," he screamed, "I'll learn you to be so smart!"

His right hand dropped swiftly. Brady drew. He saw the swift, sure rising of the .45 in Curly's hand, the hungry gaping of the big bore of the weapon. A fleeting instant of panic clutched at Brady's throat, then his .44 was bucking and roaring in his hand.

Curly's .45 blasted but the weapon was already wavering in his hand. He emitted a hoarse, choked cry as three .44 slugs ripped into him. His face twisted into a grimace of agony and he dropped his .45 and began clawing frenziedly at his chest. Suddenly his eyes went blank and his knees gave and he slumped to the floor. He lay there unmoving.

Brady turned his cold glance on Maddock. The large man seemed to want to

shrink away, but the wall at his back held him there mercilessly. His distended eyes stared with horror at the smoking .44 in Brady's hand.

"It's your turn to try now, Maddock," Brady said coldly.

Maddock hastily lifted his hands shoulder high. "I'm not heeled, Brady," he cried in a quavering voice. "Look. I'm not heeled."

"You could pick up Curly's .45," said Brady. "He doesn't need it any more."

Maddock shook his head violently. "I'm not heeled," he mumbled in a terror-stricken voice.

Brady now addressed his words to the others in the barroom as well as to Maddock. "All right. I won't shoot down a man who isn't heeled or who has his back turned. I'm not like Maddock and the Rafter M boys. But if some day I'm found like Galligan with a bullet in my back, you'll know where to look for the yellow cowards who did it. You won't have to spread it around that a smuggler pal of mine did me in. Go to Rafter M. That's where you'll find the yellow, stinking bushwhacker!"

THE next morning Brady rode out of Dragoon and headed his bay south in the direction of Broken Bit. A vast restlessness possessed him. No matter what he did or where he turned, he felt constantly uneasy, impatient and irritated.

He figured that the killing of Curly had not settled the thing one little bit but rather was only the beginning of a greater, more complicated pattern. It was entirely possible that Curly had killed Galligan. Or it might have been Chalk, or someone else that Brady had not heard about yet.

Brady did not underestimate his position. Galligan had been shot down from behind and the same thing could happen to him, Brady realized. So he stuck to open country where he could see plainly all about him and he kept scanning his backtrail to

see if he was being followed. But the land remained desolate and deserted. The only living things he saw were grazing Herefords.

Brady let the bay move leisurely and it was noon when he reached Broken Bit's buildings. They looked unchanged from when he had been here two days previously. There was a depressing air about the boarded up house, the emptiness of the corals, the silent, gaunt thrust of the windmill against the yellow sky.

Brady halted the bay on a small knoll while he stared broodingly off at the sullen, jagged hulk of the Predicadores. He began considering a jaunt up into the mountains just to see what he could see. Perhaps there was nothing up there for him. Then again he might run into something or somebody who had some new knowledge about the death of Galligan.

He was immersed in this line of thought for quite some time, unable to reach a decision one way or another, and when he finally roused himself he spotted the rider moving across the land directly toward the knoll. Brady's heart began to beat a little faster as he recognized the Arabian and the rider.

An eagerness that he could not quite understand possessed him. He tried telling himself it was only because Carmen Luz had been close to Galligan and that she undoubtedly possessed accurate knowledge about him. But then Brady realized that it wasn't only because of Galligan that he looked forward to seeing the girl.

She was wearing the same black charro hat tilted a trifle to one side on her blue-black hair and the white shirt and black divided skirt. The sun glittered and flashed where it struck the silver conchas on the wide belt about her waist. With a sort of unpleasant start Brady noticed the Winchester in the saddle scabbard. He could not recall having seen the weapon that other time.

She reined in the Arabian in front of the

bay and stared soberly at Brady for some time. At last she said, "Why don't you go home, Owen?"

The question surprised Brady. He could not think of an immediate answer and the girl went on, "Why don't you go back to Colorado?"

Brady's eyes narrowed. "I don't get you," he said slowly.

The face of Carmen Luz was very grave. Her lips were held tightly. A deep somberness lay in her eyes. "Why do you want to stay around here?" she asked in her throaty way. "There's nothing here for you, Owen. Why don't you go back home?"

A sullen irritation stirred in him. "There's something here for me all right. Galligan's killer."

The girl's face went pale. "You don't understand how it is. Please listen to me, Owen. Don't make me explain. Just say you'll go home and then go."

"Make you explain what?"

She lowered her face and shook her head. "Please, Owen," she said, voice quivering. "Don't make me say it."

He jumped the bay ahead so that it came beside the Arabian. Reaching out, he grabbed the girl's arm. "Say what?" he asked, his voice thickening. "Tell me what you know about Galligan. That's what I'm staying around here for, Carmen. I won't go until I know all there is to know about Galligan. If you want me to leave, then tell me the truth about Galligan."

She lifted her face. He could see her teeth biting down on her lower lip. Tears glistened in her eyes. "He was in an ugly business and he came to an ugly end. Isn't that enough for you?"

"No," he said brutally, "that isn't enough. I want to know more."

He still held her arm. She tried freeing it but he just squeezed his fingers tighter. "Tell me, Carmen," he growled.

"He isn't worth it, Owen," she cried. "He isn't worth your getting killed because

of him. He changed since you last saw him. He changed after he came here. I saw him change from day to day with my own eyes. He became ambitious. He wanted to own the whole world. I tried to make him see things different, but he wouldn't listen to me. He wanted money and he wanted it quick and easy. Broken Bit was just a blind. He was a rustler and a smuggler. He was no good, Owen. Go home, won't you? He was just no good! There's no point in your staying here!"

He released her arm. His face was white with rage. He lifted his hand and struck her sharply across the mouth. She uttered a pained cry, then dropped her head and began to sob brokenly.

Brady stared unseeingly up at the distant, purple-shrouded heights of the Predicadores. *No, no*, he thought. *No, I won't have to. No . . .*

Finally, the sound of the girl's anguished crying reached his heart. He looked at her. She was hunched over in the saddle, her shoulders slumped, her head bowed while she sobbed. Compassion for her touched Brady as he witnessed her obvious unhappiness.

He put a hand under her chin and forced her head up, but she squeezed her eyes shut and would not look at him. Tears ran crookedly down her cheeks.

"Look, Carmen," he said with a quiet determination. "I don't care what kind of a man Galligan was. I won't argue any more about whether he was good or bad. But let me tell you one thing. I don't care if a man is the lowest, rottenest person on the earth, he's still entitled to a fair break. If Galligan was a rustler, does that mean it was all right to shoot him down like a dog? No, Carmen. Galligan was entitled to a chance to defend himself. He wasn't given that chance. I'm going to stay around here until I find that man who didn't give Galligan his chance, I'm going to stay even if it means I've got to die trying to find out who that man was."

CHAPTER FOUR

Caught Off Guard

BRADY rode up into the Predicadores. He had no idea what he was going to find or even if he was going to find anything. A bitter sadness had settled over him. All that had been good and noble about his purpose had vanished. Now only the dogged, stubborn resolution was left.

He could not begin to define the disillusion and disappointment he had experienced. He still could not accustom himself to what was evidently the truth about Galligan for, after what Carmen Luz had told him, Brady had come to feel that there was no other conclusion he could draw about his old friend. After all, it was possible for a man to change immensely in three years. Perhaps he, Brady, had never known the real Galligan. Perhaps he had been deluded by Galligan all along.

This was difficult for Brady to believe, but, on the face of things, he could no longer do otherwise. He had resented and fought every insinuation against Galligan but after hearing Carmen Luz verify the others, the drive, the very life seemed to have gone out of Brady. Now it was only the bitterness, the final, desperate rebellion against the sordid facts that kept him going. All he had to sustain his purpose was his dogged belief that every man should have the chance to defend himself before losing his life.

That night Brady camped in the Predicadores. The next day he pushed deeper into the mountains. These were barren, lonely hills, forever rising up into the serrated, inaccessible crags that were the jagged outline of the Predicadores. Gradually, Brady lost all hope of finding anyone in these mountains. Nobody but a damn fool would live up here, he thought bitterly.

He seemed to be following what looked like a pass twisting and wriggling its serpentine way through the mountain maze.

Now and then Brady spotted signs that indicated the pass was being used. He saw hoof marks that still remained before the wind had had time to fill them in—hoof marks of horses and cows.

Brady's heart quickened. His mind began groping at something that was tantalizingly just beyond its comprehension, something that it felt it should know.

Brady became so absorbed in what possibly lay ahead that for the first time he completely forgot about his backtrail. It was the shot that abruptly jerked him back to his senses. He heard the shriek of the bullet past his ear and then he was whirling the bay around and stabbing for the handle of his .44.

As Brady came around, he saw Chalk. The big Remington .44-40 in Chalk's hand was pointed at Brady's heart. Brady had been so intent in following the tracks in the sandy floor of the pass that Chalk had been able to ride up directly behind Brady without being detected. Now Brady began to curse his carelessness but it was too late. Reluctantly, he let the .44 slide back in its holster.

A mirthless smile curved Chalk's lips. There was no expression in his pale eyes. "That's better," he said, stopping his buckskin about ten feet away. "Now unbuckle your shell belt and drop it to the ground, Brady. I don't have to tell you to be careful how you go about doing it. I've got a real fine hair-trigger on this Remington."

Brady realized there was nothing he could do but comply with Chalk's order. Slowly, carefully, he unbuckled the shell belt and let it drop to the ground. He kept wondering what Chalk had in mind. If Chalk had intended to shoot him, Brady was sure Chalk would have already done it. There must be something else in Chalk's mind and it couldn't be at all pleasant from the avid, cruel look that now came over his face.

"Get off your horse, Brady," he said.

Brady hesitated. Chalk wagged the .44-

40. "Come on. You heard me. Get off that horse."

Puzzled, Brady obeyed. He dropped the lines to the ground and the bay stood there unmoving. Chalk moved the buckskin ahead a couple of steps. He wagged the Remington again.

"Start walking, Brady," he said.

Brady still could not comprehend it. Perhaps Chalk intended setting him afoot in these desolate, uninhabited mountains to let him die of hunger and thirst. That must be it, Brady thought, but he still couldn't be sure.

"Where?" Brady asked.

Chalk uttered a low, chilling laugh. "Anywhere, Brady. Just anywhere. This is a big country. Just start walking."

Slowly, Brady turned his back and began walking up the pass. Behind him Chalk laughed once. The sound of it sent a shiver down Brady's back. Everything inside him tensed; a cold hand gripped and twisted his entrails, and he began waiting for the smash of the slug against his back. He was positive now that was what Chalk had in mind. Chalk was just playing with him, teasing him with a false hope of possible survival. When Chalk had had his fill of fun, he would put a slug in Brady's back—the same way he had probably put one in Galligan's back.

BRADY had gone about fifty feet when he heard Chalk start his horse. Brady whirled and suddenly the horrible, brutal intent of the man was clear to Brady. Chalk had holstered his Remington. Now he was spurring and whipping the buckskin into a gallop, aiming the horse at Brady. He meant to send Brady to his death under the pounding hoofs of the buckskin.

Brady looked about desperately. The ground was flat and barren. No shelter could he see. His bay was fifty feet away and the onrushing buckskin was between Brady and his horse.

A savage, feral grimace contorted Chalk's

features. He spurred and quirted until the buckskin squealed with pain and came hurtling at Brady. Brady stood transfixed. The urge to run clawed frenziedly at him, but he realized sickeningly that it would do no good. All he could do was stand and wait, watching the horse bolting at him.

He waited until the last possible instant and then with the buckskin's fetid breath blasting hot into his face, Brady dived in desperation. He threw himself with all the strength and speed he possessed to the side. Even so, the buckskin's front shoulder struck him, spinning him completely around, and he went sprawling on his back.

Chalk, laughing in sadistic joy, was reining the buckskin around for another try. Brady lunged up to his knees, wild eyes searching for something, anything. All he found was the sand he had sprawled in, the sand that was now churned up into a swirling, choking mist by the rush of the buckskin's hoofs. Only the sand—and some rocks the size of Brady's fists.

The buckskin was coming again. Brady leaped to his feet, a rock in either hand. He drew back his right hand and hurled the stone with all his might, praying desperately that his aim was true. The rock struck the buckskin on the nose, wrenching a shriek of pain out of the animal, and, despite Chalk's iron grip on the reins, the horse swerved a little.

Brady had leaped to the side. He had transferred the other stone from his left hand to his right. Now he hurled this stone at Chalk's head. Chalk ducked but the rock struck his high-peaked sombrero, knocking it down over his eyes.

Chalk cursed. He tried to rein the buckskin around and brush the hat off his head all at the same time. Brady leaped at Chalk, grabbing the man about the waist. The buckskin gave a sudden, frantic lunge, and Chalk went flying out of the saddle, Brady still hanging on to him.

They hit the ground together and the sudden impact loosed Brady's grip. Chalk

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tore himself free. He rolled over and came up on his knees. He grabbed for the handle of his .44-40. Brady jumped to his feet. As Chalk drew, Brady kicked out, smashing the toe of his boot into Chalk's belly. Chalk gasped agonizingly and the gun flew from his fingers. Brady started another kick but Chalk, despite his hurt, caught Brady's leg and twisted and Brady went sprawling on the sand.

Chalk dived for his Remington. As Brady hit the ground, his fingers fouled a sharp, jagged rock. He saw Chalk snatch eagerly at the handle of the .44-40. Brady rose halfway with the boulder in his hand and threw himself at Chalk. The man was just coming up with the gun when Brady caught him. With all his strength Brady smashed the sharp point of the rock down on Chalk's head. A second time Brady raised the rock and struck. A strangled, agonized scream ripped out of Chalk's throat, then abruptly broke off, and he slumped down on his face, dead.

From beyond him, Brady could hear the sound of a running horse. He grabbed the Remington out of Chalk's lax fingers and was just starting to come up with it when the slug smashed into his left shoulder, driving him back down on the ground. Above him, Brady saw the huge bulk of Grant Maddock mounted on a palomino. The sun glittered on the ornate, silvered surface of the six-shooter in Maddock's hand. Maddock reined in the palomino and aimed the six-shooter at Brady.

Brady fired. Maddock emitted a hurt cry and folded up over the saddlehorn. Then, with a great, groaning effort he straightened and started to aim the ornate six-shooter again. Brady fired once more. Maddock went sailing out of the saddle. He hit the ground with a loud thud, raising a cloud of dust. He did not move.

Brady lay on his back a while, staring up at the yellow sky. He could feel the blood

(Continued on page 102)

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10-52

(Continued from page 100)

running out of the wound in his shoulder and soaking his shirt. He knew he had to do something about it but for a few moments he could not bring himself to move. He could only lie there,

This then should be the end of it, he was thinking. Chalk must have done in Galligan, or maybe it was Curly, or maybe even Maddock. It really didn't matter. They were all dead and Wes Galligan was avenged. The thing hadn't been too bad and it had ended quicker and easier than Brady had hoped it would.

Maddock must have had supreme confidence in Chalk. He had held back while Chalk had proceeded with his attempt to kill Brady. When Brady had begun to fight back, Maddock must have ridden in from where he had been watching to give Chalk a hand. It was just as well, Brady thought. This way Maddock, too, was dead and the slate was wiped clean.

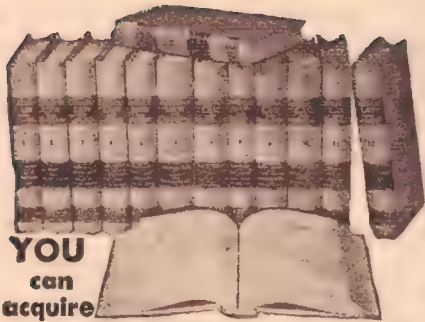
Brady decided it was time he tried to patch up his wound in some fashion and, though the effort sent bolts of pain streaking across his eyes, he rose up to a sitting position. It was then that he saw the rider coming slowly up to him.

Brady's first impulse was to snatch up the Remington but then he recognized Jasper Orion and so he dropped the weapon back to the ground. Orion dismounted and walked slowly ahead. His face looked very sick as he studied the dead bodies of Chalk and Maddock.

"What? You too?" asked Brady. "What is this? Some sort of reunion or something, Orion?"

ORION got down on his knees in front of Brady. He kept peering intently at Brady's face. Orion made an absurd picture with his dust-covered blue business suit and the small, dust-stained derby hat, but there was something strange in his face.

(Continued on page 104)



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(Continued from page 102)

"Why did you do this, Owen?" he asked in a strained whisper.

With his good right arm, Brady gestured at the two dead bodies. "Galligan can rest easy in his grave now," he said quietly.

Orion had his right hand in his coat pocket. Now he casually took his hand out. It held a small, spur-triggered .38 pistol. Orion aimed the pistol at Brady's chest.

"The thought distresses me but I must kill you, Owen," he said.

The shock of it left Brady numb. He just could not understand. Something inside him was screaming that he should understand, that he should have always understood, but still the exact, complete comprehension would not come to him. He looked down helplessly at the big .44-40, there on the ground beside his hand. The weapon was so near yet so tantalizingly far. He could never hope to scoop it up and fire before Orion put a slug in him.

All the cherubic pleasantness was gone from Orion's face. His small mouth was pinched in a tight, thin line. His bright blue eyes were grim and cold. "Have I successfully deceived you, Owen, like I have deceived everyone else? Were you deluded into believing that Maddock was the chieftain of all this smuggling that goes on through the Predicadores? Maddock was a pompous ass who gloried in playing a man of power. I gladly let him play that role while I remained hidden in the background, a small, inconsequential man who was ridiculed by all you western people. Not many knew about me. Maddock, of course, knew, and Chalk, and Curly. Amos Hall, who is my man, knows but there it ends."

Orion seemed in the grip of some consuming passion. Sweat began running down his face, his eyes glittered. Though his voice remained subdued, he could not conceal the pride that was in him nor the self-adulation.

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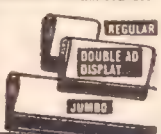
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"Consider, Owen. You came to Dragoon to discover the reason for Galligan's death. Through my secret means of communication I was instantly notified of your presence. Through bribery and intimidation I know everything about everyone here in Hays County. You can not begin to comprehend the extent of my empire, Owen!"

Brady glanced longingly at the .44-40 and then at Orion's intent face. A numbing weakness began fluttering in Brady's belly.

"I could have allowed Curly and Chalk to kill you that first day, Owen. That would have been the natural reaction of you headstrong, heedless western people. But I considered the future, Owen. Perhaps you were a government marshal. Perhaps you were a friend of Galligan's family sent down here with the express purpose of investigating his death. If you, too, were killed that would prompt an even more intense investigation.

"So I decided to discredit Galligan in your eyes. If I could convince you that Galligan was a scoundrel and a thief who got just what he deserved, you would go back to Colorado and the matter would be done. I arranged Hall's testimony. I had Chalk intimidate Esmond. Chalk was very proficient at intimidation, by the way. A valuable man to me, exceedingly valuable.

"But you were a loyal, stubborn fool, Owen. You refused to believe anything bad about Galligan." Orion sighed. "So I had no choice. I detailed Curly to eliminate you but you demonstrated your competence by eliminating Curly instead. That gave me pause to think. You were more difficult than I had supposed. So I decided to use



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the Luz girl. I am a master at analyzing people, Owen. The Luz girl is fond of you, much fonder than she ever was of Galligan. What a pity that you must die without taking advantage of this fondness. I sent Chalk to intimidate her, and she, too, came to you with her story of Galligan's perfidy. But still you would not yield, Owen, and that brings us up to today."

Orion waved his left hand in a helpless gesture. "You realize, Owen, I could not let you imperil my empire. So I detailed Chalk and Maddock, the fools, to eliminate you. Luckily, I followed. I had a faint suspicion all along that you might prove too much for them. You western people accept violence so heedlessly. Take Chalk. He had to try to eliminate you the hard way. Not by the simple expedient of a bullet in your back. He had to attempt to ride you down just to satisfy his sadistic appetite. Chalk was a good man but entirely without imagination or any understanding of consequences. Maddock, the pompous fool, rode in wildly and recklessly. As a result they are both dead. But consider me, Owen!"

Orion drew himself up proudly. "I proceeded with caution and discretion. I rode up quietly with no open hostile intent. You could have shot me down had I aroused your suspicions, but I am not heedlessly foolish like you western people. Thus I was able to come up on you and very easily and simply get, as you western people so quaintly put it, 'the drop on you.' Is this not clever, Owen?"

BRADY looked down again at the .44-40. He realized the hopelessness of his situation but he wasn't going to just sit and take it. He knew he had very little chance of getting the .44-40 in time, he would probably be dead before he could even fire the gun, but he'd at least have the satisfaction of knowing he had tried. Still there was one more thing he wanted to know be-

GUN-CALL!

fore he attempted to get his .44-40 lying on the ground.

"Tell me, Orion," he said stiffly, "who killed Galligan and why?"

"Gladly, Owen," said Orion. "Chalk killed Galligan under my express instructions. You see, Owen, Galligan impeded our operations. To arrive at this pass one must traverse Broken Bit land. I sent emissaries to bribe Galligan, to intimidate him, but he was an honest, noble fool like you, Owen. He would not listen to reason. Then he made the cardinal mistake of suspecting me so there was nothing to do but have him eliminated."

Brady could feel the hard, anxious beating of his heart. Orion's eyes were fixed on Brady's face, on Brady's good right arm. Slowly, surreptitiously, Brady angled one leg, digging the toe of his boot into the soft sand. It wasn't much of a chance but it was all he had.

"You're a clever man, Orion," Brady said quietly. "You're the cleverest man I've ever known." He noted Orion's chest swelling with pride, the pleased, vain tightening of his small mouth. "I don't like to die, but there is some consolation in the thought of dying-at the hands of a man as clever as you. I've done the best I could. You were just too much for me. So why should I cry about it? Do you understand what I'm trying to say, Orion? Do you understand what I mean about your being so clever?"

Orion's face glowed with egotism. His eyes glittered with vanity. "Indeed, Owen, I—"

About to embark on another oration, Orion's vigilance relaxed a little. Flattery had soothed him, had taken the fine edge off his caution. Grimly, Brady realized it was now or never. He kicked out and up with his boot.

The lash of his foot picked up enough sand to send it flying up at Orion's face. The sudden unexpectedness of it startled

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Orion. He averted his eyes for a fleeting instant, his left hand flung up to shield his face, and at that moment Brady was dropping over on his side and scooping up the .44-40.

Orion fired. Brady felt the hot breath of the bullet past his face. The Remington was in his hand and pointing as he hit the ground. Brady thumbed off a shot. Orion screamed as the slug slammed into his chest. He fired again but this shot was way wild.

The Remington roared again in Brady's hand. Orion's mouth slacked horribly open. The whites of his eyes showed. He began making small, piteous, crying sounds in his throat. Suddenly these ceased and Orion collapsed in a heap. He was dead—the little man so full of pride was finally dead.

Brady had to try twice before he could get himself back up in a sitting position. Everything reeled before him. Gradually, the spinning, lurching world quieted before his eyes and then he saw Carmen Luz approaching.

She was racing up on her Arabian, evidently attracted and guided by all the shooting. About ten feet away she halted the horse and jumped out of the saddle but there she stopped, as if frozen to the ground, staring mutely at him with a wan, sick look on her face. She didn't move at all.

Brady stared at her dumbly. A torrent of words formed in his mouth, but he could not articulate any of them. The realization of what she meant to him finally dawned on him and he understood now that this feeling had existed in him from the first moment he had ever seen her. He wondered why he hadn't realized it before.

At last his throat loosened. "Carmen," he said.

Suddenly she relaxed and she came running up to him. She would not speak. "Carmen," he said again but she would not look at his face. She worked at his wound.

GUN-CALL!

She bound it. "Carmen," he said a third time when she was done, but she averted her face. He could hear her crying softly, trying to hide it from him.

"Carmen," he said, taking her arm sharply in his right hand and drawing her up against him. "It's because of Wes, isn't it? It's because of what you told me about him, isn't it? Orion spilled everything, Carmen. He was sure he would kill me and so he told me everything. He told me about Chalk and you. Don't cry because of that, Carmen. Please don't. I understand why you did it now."

Her face was buried against his chest. Her voice came, full of hurt and shame. "I shouldn't have talked about him like that, Owen, I shouldn't have. You slapped me and you should have slapped me more for what I said. But Chalk came to me. He told me what to say, he warned me not to let you catch on. He said he would shoot you down like a dog if I didn't do it. I couldn't let you die, Owen. I couldn't let you die."

He patted her shoulder gently. "Forget it, Carmen. I understand. Let's never talk about it again. Just tell me one more thing. How did you get here?"

"When you came up here in the Predicadores, I watched and I saw Chalk and Maddock come after you and then Orion. So I followed them. I told myself if they so much as hurt you I'd kill them. I never felt that way about Wes, as long as I knew him, which is why I never married him. He wanted me to, Owen, but I just didn't feel that way about him."

A great contentment came over Brady. He stroked her hair and said softly, "You'll like Colorado, Carmen," he said. Then a sudden fear struck him. "You'll come, won't you?"

She lifted her face and smiled at him, a bright smile of promise that was for him alone. "Of course, Owen, of course, I will. . . ."

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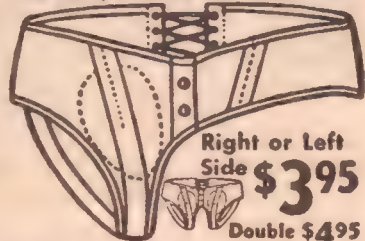
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(Continued from page 6)

he didn't see anybody there that he knew.

Then he got his big idea. He rounded up his five fired men, and they rode out to camp. He got the cook and ordered him to pack up and hitch up his chuck wagon. He got the wrangler to round up the remuda. Then the trail driver started his parade.

He had the wrangler and a few hands lead off with 150 saddle horses, all wearing the famous Running W on their hips and K on the jaw. Behind them the cook and flunkie came driving the big chuck wagon pulled by six mules also marked with the King brand.

They rode into town this way, stopping traffic as they paraded down to the bank and halted the big outfit and the wagons. Then the trail boss went into the bank and called the banker out.

"I reckon you know the King Ranch brand, don't you? Well, there it is on 150 saddle horses. There it is painted clear across the side of my chuckwagon. Go look at the cook's saddle and you'll see it worked into the leatherwork. In fact, look at every animal and every piece of equipment in this whole shebang and all you'll see is the King Ranch brand. If that don't identify me, tell me what else you need."

The banker had a good laugh at the enterprising trail herder, and cashed his check. The boss paid off the backsliding hands, who unsaddled their horses and threw them into the remuda, and went about finishing their job of painting the town.

The trail boss took his identification back to camp, and lit out for Cheyenne. . . .

It often took this sort of aggressive resourcefulness to get things accomplished in the old West. And—for more stories of the enterprising men and women who made Western history, be sure to read the next issue of .44 WESTERN. It will be on the newsstand October 17th.

The Editor

A JOB FOR THE FORTY-ONE KID

(Continued from page 75)

He considered a moment. "Well," he remarked, "That gent won't be comin' back over here to make any complaints. Last I saw of him he wasn't makin' any kicks whatever."

The small black and white pup came trotting across the floor to meet the Kid, his tiny stub of a tail wagging.

"How are yuh, stout fella?" asked the Kid, and putting his heavy black-sombrero on the bar, he raised the pup and deposited him on the brim. As if knowing he were at home, the pup lay down and promptly went to sleep.

"You know," said the Kid, "I've once heard a feller say something I never been able to forget. The more he saw of men, this feller said, the more he liked dogs."

"So old Horseface won't be comin' over here to make no kicks, eh?" said Creswell as he brought out a special brand of whiskey he kept hidden in the back bar. "That's good. Drink up, Kid. I told that bird he'd be plumb satisfied, that you didn't have any weakness nor soft spot in you, Kid."

But the Kid wasn't even listening. His full attention was taken up in making pincers of his thumb and forefinger, grabbing at a fly which had been buzzing about the pup's nose.



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(Continued from page 41)

soaked hatchet that had been tied to his saddle. In his left dangled a blood-dripping thing. A horrible object of two braids of course, black hair attached to a human scalp. From the hair line to the edge of the scalp was a long, white scar!

Scalpy managed a twisted grin on his pain-tortured face. His shirt was blood-soaked. Hefty had caught up with Steve and they both eased the sinking form of Scalpy to the ground.

"It's the end of the trail, amigos. . . . twenty years she's been waitin' for me. Straw-colored hair. . . . I can go, now. Her hands is a-reachin' out. Go on with the drive . . . put the herd through . . . it will be all right now. . . ."

They buried Scalpy in the shade of the cottonwood tree in the bend of the Pecos river. They placed his body in his tarp-covered bed roll and let it down with saddle ropes in the grave that was long and deep. Two Long Seven punchers had died in the fight. They buried them near the place that held Scalpy's body. Three graves in the bend of the river that would mark the spot where the Long Seven cattle drive camped at San Jose.

"What's the orders for the day, boss?" Hefty asked Steve and grinned. Steve paused a moment before answering.

"That the way you really feel about it, Hefty?"

"You said it, Steve. That goes for the rest of the boys, too. Just count me in as a hand. I don't even know where I'm at. I been lost ever since I left Dike, Texas."

"Always did want to see Wyoming," Steve answered. "What do you think about the Haden brothers pointing her nose north?"

Hefty lifted a match to his cigarette before answering.

"Them Haden boys," Hefty said, "can sure speak the language o' cows. Plumb

LONG SEVEN HEADS NORTH

scarey the way they talked them long-horns out o' stampedin'. That Hank one that don't do nothin but grin starts t' sing a lullaby that had them locoed steers plumb asleep on their feet—just a millin' around and a-wishin' they could lay down. Yessir, she was plumb scarey, so the boys who saw it, said."

"Hefty, you take a couple of the boys and herd them prisoners into Box Elder. Tell Doc Adams he might as well be sheriff. It won't bother his practice any. Then you can pick us up at Idell crossing."

Dutch Oven swung the chuck wagon team and the wheels twisted over the rough ground. The night-hawk was asleep on the bed rolls. The Haden boys slapped their chaps with a coiled rope. Little clouds of dust rose from the hoofs of the steers, then gathered overhead in a large, gray cloud.

Long Seven Pointed North! ■ ■ ■

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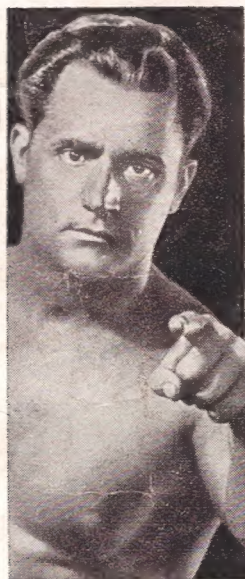
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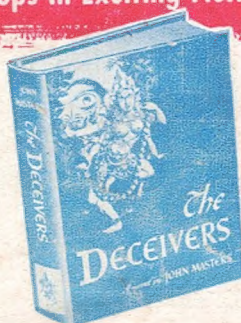
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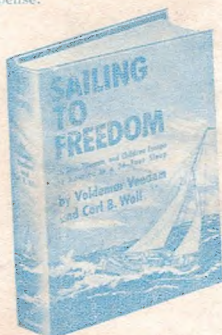
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